JOLMA

The Journal for the Philosophy
of Language, Mind and the Arts

Vol. 4 – Num. 1
Giugno 2023

**Edizioni
Ca'Foscari**

JoLMA
The Journal for the Philosophy
of Language, Mind and the Arts

Editor-in-Chief
Luigi Perissinotto

JoLMA
The Journal for the Philosophy of Language, Mind and the Arts

Six-monthly Journal

Table of Contents

UNFRAMING/REFRAMING IN THE CONTEMPORARY VISUAL, PERFORMING, AND MEDIA ARTS

Unframing/Reframing
in the Contemporary Visual, Performing,
and Media Arts

**edited by Cristina Baldacci, Pietro Conte,
Susanne Franco**

Introduction

Cristina Baldacci, Susanne Franco
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Pietro Conte
Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

This issue of JoLMA proposes to examine the concepts of unframing and reframing from the interdisciplinary perspective of visual art, performance, and media studies, by following both a theoretical and a practice-based approach. As the contributions here collected demonstrate – starting with the conversation with Mieke Bal, which serves as a methodological framework for the entire issue – the entanglement of theory and practice becomes crucial when an attempt is made to introduce new epistemological standpoints.

Over the last two decades, the notion of the frame has been radically challenged in the visual, performing, and media arts, particularly as a consequence of the introduction of two mutually related concepts: 'unframing' and 'reframing'. While the first refers to the gesture of ideally getting rid of any framing device, the second offers alternative ways to contextualise objects, acts, and images in time and space.

Yet, unframing and reframing should not be understood as opposite gestures but as a single, ongoing interpretative (visual) process which includes the gesture of 'deframing' (Ferrari, Pinotti 2018; Conte 2020). It also opens up new possibilities in artistic practice, as well as in aesthetic theory, media, performance and cultural studies, and art history (Bal 2002). This process reactivates and continuously changes the relationship both with the context in which an image, an object, an action, but also an idea or a story, are inserted,

and with time – a time that is no longer linear or hierarchical, as it leaves room for anachronisms and reenactments (Baldacci, Nicastro, Sforzini, 2022; Baldacci, Franco, 2022).

Especially in the contemporary mediascape of augmented, virtual, and mixed realities, as well as in the metaverse or in the context of pictures generated by or through artificial intelligence, the rapid pace of technological advancement has definitely undermined the traditional concept of the image as an artefact disclosing an 'unreal' dimension necessarily isolated from the real world of everyday life by virtue of some sort of framing device. De facto, in augmented reality (AR) and mixed reality (XR) our field of vision is superimposed with digital information so that the boundaries between flesh and blood, reality and the image world are blurred, while in virtual reality (VR) the experiencers find themselves surrounded by 360° visual content and immersed into a multisensorial dimension where the frame – according to most interpreters – would be gone and the two-dimensional limits dissolved (Iñárritu 2017).

As a consequence, 'unframedness' has been exploited as a form of propaganda to celebrate the ability of the most recent digital (un)realities to put ourselves in other people's shoes, encouraging greater empathy between individuals and, thus, inducing pro-social behaviour change (Milk 2015). Debunking the rhetoric underlying this narrative of 'total immersion' is an urgent task. It has already prompted scholars to ask themselves whether the gesture of unframing should be better understood as a new form of reframing rather than a radical act that implies getting rid of all frames.

For Mieke Bal, framing remains the core concept and action, with or without the 'un-' and 're-' prefixes. She is sceptical towards unframing, as she considers it an oppositional interpretative gesture in the context of cultural analysis. "Framing is giving sense and meaning to what we see or read. Unframing is reverting the complex artwork into chaos": This is how she brilliantly sets the tone of the discussion on framing and reframing in "Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice". The conversation provides her with the opportunity to look back at her analytically based art practice and her practice-based theoretical work by taking the operational concept of the frame, as well as the many actions it generates, as the crux of the matter. According to Bal, framing does many important things, among which subverting the traditional, linear, and chronological views of time; that is, bringing into question unilateral thinking. If framing is a first and fundamental act of interpretation, reframing does not mean repeating the same – doing it again – but instead it presupposes doing something differently – anew.

By employing analytical tools pioneered by Mieke Bal, such as the concept of reading and reframing, Margherita Fontana's "Reframing Second-Wave Feminism Through Fashion Industry and Augmented

Reality: Recent Trends in Judy Chicago's Work" focuses on two projects by Judy Chicago (Chicago, 1939), a leading figure in American feminist art. While emerging from the cultural milieu of second-wave feminism, these projects – *The Female Divine* (2020) and *Rainbow AR* (2020) – undergo a process of reframing when confronted with the visual and economic dynamics of the fashion industry on the one hand and new technologies on the other. From this perspective, they should be characterised as reenactments or rather *post*-enactments, this is how Fontana sees it. In this context, the notion of reframing serves as an essential tool for assessing the political significance of Chicago's work in the field of contemporary cultural phenomena.

There is another compelling contribution dedicated to the relationship between framing and new technologies. In "Framing Humans for AI" Gabriella Giannachi starts a conversation with ChatGPT and GPT-4 to investigate how artists have represented human-machine AI entanglements. More specifically, she discusses pioneering artworks (by Lynn Hershman Leeson, Mario Klingemann, Kate Crawford & Trevor Paglen, and Luca Viganò) to illustrate our presumptions about what AI does or even thinks and learns from us. And what happens when our 'self' must be framed to be machine-readable. Humans are both the source and outcome of the AI-human entanglements, and this occurs in a historical moment in which reality and fiction are no longer separable, and consciousness is no longer associated with the 'I' but rather localised outside of us and devolved to machines. By analysing specific artworks, Giannachi gives the reader the possibility to grasp some aspects of these machines, which – as she ironically suggests – were created "to defend us from the unknown". She also provides enthralling arguments to declare the dissolution of any frame between humans and AI.

Stefano Mudu's "Camille Henrot's 'Grosse Fatigue': The Frame as an Ordering Element of Hyper-Enactment", also addresses the complex history of the (co)evolution between humanity, new technologies, and the Universe through the ordering role that the frame plays in *Grosse Fatigue*, a "desktop documentary" presented by French artist Camille Henrot (Paris, 1978) at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. This work uses words and images to build an accelerated, schizophrenic narrative that asks the viewers to immerse themselves in an emotionally all-encompassing audiovisual montage, with continuous references to mankind's relationship with history and knowledge. Mudu's article aims to demonstrate how the narrative effect is achieved thanks to the programmatic study of composition. The desktop digital frames are the *lieu* where the space of the work and the space of the spectator collide. Henrot manages them chaotically to show how the images of history participate in the process of a non-linear construction and reconstruction-construction causing an 'extreme fatigue' to the viewers, who are troubled when trying to

orient themselves. Mudu interprets *Grosse Fatigue* as an "hyper-en-actment" to stress how pre-existing images/objects, which in Henrot's work are here framed by the desktop, aggregate and produce new narratives precluding any attempt to retrace their references.

From the desktop the discussion moves on – or maybe back-wards – to the sheet of paper, namely to printed matter. In "Framing the Unframed: 'Avalanche', an Art Magazine", Tancredi Gusman explores another crucial space for the dissemination of knowledge, and in particular of contemporary art. "Avalanche", the well-known avant-garde magazine published between 1970 and 1976 in New York, is chosen to discuss the challenging dimensions and idioms of art and its sites of production and dissemination from a historical perspective. Conceptual art has questioned the very possibility of defining the boundaries of an artwork and, therefore, has offered new ways of framing by setting the conditions of its circulation and reception. In other words, Gusman suggests that in the 1970s art and artists' magazines – among which "Avalanche" had a pivotal role – became a necessary tool for framing and unframing artworks and art practices by expanding them in time and space. "Avalanche" was undoubtedly a site of construction, communication, and (re)mediation for the artworks it presented.

The last two contributions of the issue analyse the concept of framing by focusing on its aesthetic and art historical value.

Michele Di Monte choses as leitmotif and title for his examination a rhetorical and captivating question. He asks himself and the reader is "The image in a Vat?" In doing so, he argues that by promising completely frameless virtual and fictional worlds, new digital technologies have renewed a classical issue of aesthetics and art history, namely the relationship between frames and artworks or images. With an analytical eye, Di Monte frames both the question of the frame and that of the image threshold, by digging into all possible cognitive, phenomenological, and ontological implications, and by taking the reader on a multi-layered interpretive journey.

Whereas, from another very interesting perspective, in "Differences Between Single and Sequential Pictorial Storytelling", Hannah Fasnacht poses a distinct but also complementary question: What differentiates narration with sequential images from narration with single images? By confronting still and moving images, her paper examines their common usages in order to better understand the differences between them for visual narration. Her aim is to gain insight into the narration with sequential images as a specific two-dimensional pictorial narration.

As is made evident by the variety of perspectives and interpretations that this introduction only briefly presents, the debate around the complex notions of framing, reframing, and unframing is far from being over. And that is precisely the main purpose of the present is-

sue of JoLMA: to offer a meta-frame to the question of framing procedures, their agency, and the multifarious ways they impact upon the beholder.

The editors would like to thank the authors very much for their precious contributions and for granting permissions for the publication of the images. A special thank goes to Alessandro Cavazzana for his valuable and accurate editorial help.

References

Bal, M. (2002). "Framing". Bal, M., *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 133-73.

Baldacci, C.; Nicastro, C.; Sforzini, A. (eds) (2022). *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*. Berlin: ICI Berlin Press.

Baldacci, C.; Franco, S. (eds) (2022). *On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools*. Turin: Accademia University Press.

Conte, P. (2020). *Unframing Aesthetics*. Milan-London: Mimesis International.

Ferrari, D.; Pinotti, A. (eds.), (2018). *La cornice. Storie, teorie, testi*. Milano: Johan & Levi.

Iñárritu, A.G. (2017). "Carne y Arena". Press release. Milan: Fondazione Prada. https://www.fondazioneprada.org/wp-content/uploads/1-Carne-y-Arena_Fondazione-Prada_press-release.pdf.

Milk, C. (2015). "Virtual Reality Is 'the Last Medium'". *Re/Code*. October 1. https://www.vox.com/2015/10/1/11619088/virtual-reality-is-the-last-medium-says-filmmaker-and-vrse-ceo-chris.

Pinotti, A. (2017). *Self-negating Images: Towards An-iconology. Proceedings*, 1(9), 856. https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings1090856.

Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice
A Conversation on Framing and Reframing

Mieke Bal
University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Cristina Baldacci, Susanne Franco
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Pietro Conte
Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

Abstract   In this conversation, Mieke Bal retraces the perimeter of her analytically based art practice and her practice-based theoretical work, taking advantage of the operational concept of frame but also of the many actions it generates – such as framing, unframing, de-framing, and re-framing. She considers the act of framing, understood as a first gesture of interpretation, much more useful than the noun itself for our understanding of the effects and meanings of art. Framing as an action can also potentially subvert the traditional, linear, and chronological views of time, bringing into question unilateral thinking. From this perspective, re-framing does not mean doing something again but doing something different – that is, something new – while unframing, instead of a refusal of the act of framing, is to put chaos into an artwork.

EDITORS   *The concept of framing plays a crucial role in both your the-oretical work and practice as an artist and art curator, which are deep-ly interconnected. On the one hand, the way you have been carrying out theoretical research is a form of activism and practical militancy; on the other, your work as an artist and art curator is a form of the-orization. How much, and in what way, is 'framing' a useful tool for bridging the gap between theory and practice?*

MIEKE BAL   I like the way you reverse the traditional views in the for-mulation of your question. My theoretical writings tend to have a polit-ical, activist point to make, while staying theoretically precise. More-over, my artistic and curatorial work figures as 'theoretical fictions', to bring in that term that Freud came up with. That reversal alone already demonstrates the usefulness of the concept of 'framing'. Be-cause, what framing does, first of all, is delimiting what is relevant and what can be left aside. The practice of cultural analysis I have ex-plored thus becomes inflected, or tainted, with fictionality. The con-cept of 'framing' has been productively put to use in cultural analysis as an alternative to the older concept of context. One of the most in-fluential formulations of this concept, usefully succinct, is Jonathan Culler's "Author's Preface" to his volume *Framing the Sign*. 'Framing' can assist us in avoiding the conflation of origin, cause, and intention, a conflation of three ideas of beginning, so frequent in interpretive endeavours which confuses metaphysics, logic, and psychology (Cull-er 1988, XII-XVI). In its difference from the more usual deployment of 'context', framing refers to a verb, not a thing. As such, it helps to avoid the reification into a thing and, instead, to demonstrate that the verb form of framing produces an event, for which a subject (here, the analysing scholar) is responsible. While framing calls for the recogni-tion of the subjective agency in the act, the agent of framing is framed in turn. In this way, the attempt to account for one's own acts of fra-ming is doubled. First, one makes explicit what one brings to bear on the object of analysis: why, on what grounds, and to what effect. Then one attempts to account for one's own position as a subject of framing, including for the rules to which one submits. This is a double self-reflection. It thus might help solve the problems of unreconstruct-ed contextualism as well as of a moralistic and naive self-reflexivity.

EDS   *Absolutely. And what about the use of framing as a way to bring theory and practice closer together?*

M.B.   I think your reversal in your account of my work already does this. Framing as a concept, brought to life with the use of verb forms, subject nomination, hence, responsibility, brings theoretical reflec-tion into the practice, and compels people involved in practices to account for what they do, and realise why they do it that way. That

Figure 1 "Descartes mad, or doubting?" (still from Mieke Bal, *Reasonable Doubt*, 2016). Photo: Przemo Wojciechowski

accounting, which is what reflection on framing compels, is, precisely, where practice calls upon theory, and asks theory to help make the artwork meaningful, so that it can stand the test of analysis. In my film work I have attempted to do just that: for example, how can we make a film based on Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* from 1856 while staying true to what is most significant about that novel: its critical contemporaneity? The usual genre of the historical costume drama betrays just that aspect, and thus what is most important in Flaubert's novel. By placing/framing the story in the past of Flaubert's time the later films obliterate the novel's (then-)actuality. Also, in my film on Descartes, the alleged master of rationalism had to be shown in his bouts of madness, his moments where he could not stay the cliché rationalist and dualist we have made of him [fig. 1].[1] And then, there is the involvement of 'time' in interpretation and analysis. 'Framing' as a verb form points to process. Process both requires time and fills time. It is a factor of 'sequence' and 'duration'. And where there is duration, change occurs: differences emerge over time. This is where history, inevitably and importantly, participates in any act of interpretation or analysis. But not in a chronological, linear sequence.

1   See M. Bal, *Reasonable Doubt*, 2016, multiple-screen video installation, multi-lingual with English subtitles. See also Bal 2020.

EDS   *As an interpretative process, framing seems to be at the core of your attempt to maintain the notion of 'reading' art while, at the same time, avoiding Manichaean oppositions, such as text vs. image, verbal vs. iconic, and hermeneutical vs. visual. Is it so?*

M.B.   Yes, for me, avoiding reasoning through binary oppositions (of which the sign 'vs.' is the primary symptom) is of crucial importance. Oppositional thinking makes reading for complexity quite difficult, perhaps impossible. It is the most widespread form of simplification. And it is the major source of discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping… Just think of the division of people into 'black' and 'white'. We all know that practically no one is really black, at most, brown; and no one, except perhaps people suffering from albinism, is truly white. So, that opposition is just a tool for simplification, hierarchisation, and in the end, racism. The male-female opposition is seemingly more reasonable, but is it, really? And what is the point of it? 'Reading' art is a way of entering into what the artwork, in all its complexity, is laying out, for its viewers or readers to unpack in its nuances as well as structural 'main lines'. The concept and act of framing help to keep those nuances in sight, delineating and deciphering what, in their combination, they achieve. 'Unframing' would be a way of refusing acts of framing, as if these acts were limitations. But the opposite is the case. Framing is giving sense and meaning to what we see or read. Unframing is reverting the complex artwork into chaos.

An important consequence of framing having its roots in time is the unstable position of knowledge itself. This might seem to lead to an epistemic aporia, since knowledge itself loses its fixed grounding. However, as I contended in an earlier book, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (Bal 2002) a full endorsement of this instability can also produce a different kind of grounding, a grounding of a practical kind. Thus, every act of analysing begins and ends with a material practice. That practice, in turn, reaches out to cultural analysis, claiming to participate fully in the academic practices whose object it would otherwise, powerlessly, remain. Instead, in my practice, the object, an image staged, *mise en scène,* is put under pressure; its meaning is multiplied, and its material existence is set up as troubled. In other words, my object is 'framed'.

EDS   *What does that entail?*

M.B.   Framing, as a concept, has become so 'hot' since Derrida's discussion of Kant's *Third Critique* in *La vérité en peinture*, that it seems useful to avoid philosophical partisanship, in the disciplinary as well as deconstructivist sense. The verb form 'framing' – provisionally distinguished from the noun 'frame' – solicits the question

of its object. But, as a verb, it also predicates that object, not in the abstract void of theoretical reflection, but in time, space, aspect; it 'frames' it. Thus, all by itself, even on the level of the word alone, 'framing' questions the object-status of the objects studied in the cultural disciplines. This questioning results in a repositioning of the object as alive, in ways that have to do with the 'social life of things' rather than with a metaphysical hypostasising of objects or a rhetorical strategy of personification. It also results in the status of image – rather than text – as the most characteristic, indeed, paradigmatic, kind of cultural object, provided we continue to see it as living its life in the present and the ways we frame it as provisional. For, an image solicits and demands looking-seeing, and that act can only be performed in the present tense.[2]

Indeed, in my book *Double Exposures*, I considered the 'life of objects' in their 'present tense', and how they come to produce meaning (Bal 1996). That work is usually framed as museum studies although it might just as well have been called semantics, anthropology, or, to use my own favourite term, cultural analysis. On no account, though, can it be unproblematically assimilated into art history, for it challenged rather than endorsed the historical that defines that discipline, foregrounding, instead, the slippery but crucial 'now-time' of art objects seen as (Benjaminian) 'images'. But it did provoke art history. As a discipline, the latter was invited to reconsider its key terms and methods as being porously continuous with the other disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields that host my work. This invitation on my part fitted into my ongoing argument on the nature of interdisciplinarity, as 'non-indifferent' to disciplinarity.

EDS *How would you define the difference – both in theory and practice – between the act of framing and that of reframing?*

M.B. Framing is a first gesture of interpretation. As I said above, framing as a verb of action, as embedded in time, as bound to a subject, and as delimiting what is relevant for the interaction between artwork and viewer/reader, is a much more useful concept for our understanding of the effects and meanings of art and literature than 'context' could ever be. Useful, because practical. Framing is something you 'do', whereas 'context' is a noun indicating something – some thing. Reframing is usually said of an act of revisioning the older status and meaning of, for example, pictures. This reframing comes later, and rejuvenates the old-master art, for example. But don't be fooled by the repetitiveness suggested by that preposition 're-'. Here, 're-' does not mean 'doing it again' but doing it anew,

---

2 For Derrida's view see Derrida 1978. On the sociality of objects, cf. Appadurai 1986.

differently. This is what I have argued and demonstrated in *Quoting Caravaggio*. The act of quoting mentioned in that book is not a repetitive one, but a revisioning. This revisioning changes the older artwork, forever. After being reframed by a later work, the old one can never return to its earlier state. We cannot see it anymore as 'what it was' but only as what it has become. Without being able to predict what it will become later (Bal 1999).

EDS *Associating the idea of originality with the process of framing and reframing is indeed in itself problematic, as the process consists of a continuous movement between repetition and difference. Instead of worrying about the presumed origin of images, wouldn't it be better to focus on their destination trying to trace or imagine the plural temporalities and spatialities they shape?*

M.B. I think 'originality' is not about 'origin'. The idea of originality concerns the special quality of the artworks in question. It's about their creative, innovative mode of setting off or standing out from the usual, the habitual – their power of not repeating what came before them. That differentiation concerns the imagination and the way that faculty is capable of making something new. For me, the imagination and the intellect go hand in hand. The one cannot function without the other. And yes, you rightly call the result of the shaping they do, 'plural', as in 'plural temporalities and spatialities'. That plurality depends, of course, on the style and topic involved. But I tend to agree if the word means an opening up of possibilities. The destination rather than the source, or past, is open and can go in many different directions. It is also important to consider the future and allow artworks to come up with an as-yet-unknown future in which they can function in different ways.

EDS *The relationship between analysis and practice – first opened up, then negotiated – constitutes the area where framing might emerge as a concept that helps to define the parameters of interdisciplinarity in a radical sense.*

M.B. I cannot abide the distinction, let alone opposition, between theory and practice. Nor do I accept an opposition between analysis and practice. My film work, which would count as a practice, because it takes bodies, hands, and many participants to 'make' the films, is analytically based. Before I can start filming I am compelled to analyse the pre-text, the work or situation, story or image, on which I base the script, the scenario, the storyboard, the casting, and everything else involved. The two activities of analysing and practicing cannot, not ever, be distinguished. Their integration is, precisely, the interdisciplinary ground on which any analysis and any practice

Figure 2   "Thomas Germaine as, from left to right: Léon, Charles, Rodolphe" (still from Mieke Bal & Michelle Williams Gamaker, Madame B., 2013). Photo: Thijs Vissia; collage: Margreet Vermeulen

stand. In the formulation of your question you speak of opening up, then negotiating the relationship between analysis and practice. But what is there to open up if the two are already, from the start, indispensable to each other? Perhaps there is a phase in the production when analysing comes first. For example, when considering making the film and installation *Madame B* that took off and addressed from Flaubert's novel, it took an understanding of how the main character Emma is trapped in the double exploitation of erotic and capitalist seduction, to see how the three men in her life, the boring husband, the predatory Rodolphe, and the naive young Léon, in all their differences, are fundamentally alike. That takes analysis **[fig. 2]**.[3]

But then, the practice took over quite quickly when we (Michelle Williams Gamaker and myself) decided to give form, or figuration, to that likeness by casting the same actor in the three roles. What we did was frame the relational similitude of their relationship to Emma in the figuration of the men in the same body. The practical side came from our conviction that the actor, Thomas Germaine, was brilliant in his theatrical skills and so, could do this in a convincing manner. But no; that is not just practical. It took a close analysis of Germaine's acting in an earlier film to make that practical decision. Framing the male characters as similarly framing Emma (in the negative sense of exploitation and trapping) – was that an instance of analysing, theorising, practicing? I am happy to leave that question open. In relation

---

3   M. Bal (co-directed with M. Williams Gamaker), *Madame B: Explorations in Emotional Capitalism,* 2013, HDV, nineteen-screen installation, multi-lingual with English subtitles. See also Bal 2016.

to interdisciplinarity, I would suggest that we are far removed from any disciplinary constraints with this example.

EDS   *Speaking of reframing, you have stated that it stands as the opposite of historical interpretation. By adding meanings that were not envisioned either by the artist/maker or by former interpreters/viewers, reframing provides the image with new associations, while simultaneously obscuring other (previous) aspects and features. Could you elaborate further on this?*

M.B.   As I have written at the beginning of my book *Quoting Caravaggio*, reframing is an indispensable mode of looking/seeing. The later image from within which we look at older ones reframes the latter. Let me quote that opening passage once more:

> Quoting Caravaggio changes his work forever. Like any form of representation, art is inevitably engaged with what came before it, and that engagement is an active reworking. It specifies what and how our gaze sees. Hence, the work performed by later images obliterates the older images as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead. This process is exemplified by an engagement of contemporary culture with the past that has important implications for the ways we conceive of both history and culture in the present. (Bal 199, 1)

I suppose this relation between past and present (for me, in mutuality) is what your question alludes to. I used here the word 'quotation'. The concept of quotation, which serves as the central theoretical focus or 'hub' of this passage, will lead us beyond the common understanding of quotation. This has aptly been summarised by McEvilley. This author rightly points out that quotation is not a unified practice with unified goals. But, going beyond McEvilley's differentiation of the art practice called 'quotationalism', I have explored how this practice redefines and complicates the notion of quotation itself, as a crucial aspect of media products as well as transfers, and transformations, from one media product to another, through inflections of their respective media. In short, quotation is indispensable to understanding the intermedial practice and the media products that practice produces. I use the term 'media products', following Lars Elleström's choice to avoid medium-specificity as well as undefinable vague common words. If I use 'text' or 'image' it is to denote a media product within a particular medium.[4]

---

[4]   See McEvilley 1993. Classical works at the background of this argument are the two volumes edited by Lars Elleström in 2021 – with a long introduction that is almost a hand-

EDS   *Intermediality is indeed a fundamental concept to be linked to framing and reframing. Thanks for bringing it up for discussion. How did you approach Elleström's work and how much has it influenced your practice?*

M.B.   When the term 'intermedial(ity)' appears, I cannot help but briefly mention the key role Lars Elleström has played in developing that field. With the combination of rigour and creativity, he and the participants of the IMS-Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies at Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden, which he co-founded and shaped, have made a decisive step forward, to which I luckily have become a close witness and sometimes participant. As an academic who is also a filmmaker, I am very much aware of intermediality. The inevitable integration of words and images, colour, sound, narrativity, and technological effects and more, clearly demonstrates that no single disciplinary framework will do to understand, analyse and teach the significant and pervasive participation of intermediality in culture. As W.J.T. Mitchell has rightly argued, there are no "essential" differences between media, even if they differ in institutional and formal appearances. What catches my eye in the title of the two edited volumes Elleström published in 2021, is primarily that word 'relations', in combination with the preposition 'inter-'. This relationality is particularly important to me. In the title of those two earlier volumes, *Beyond Media Borders: Intermedial Relations Among Multimodal Media*, every word counts, and is programmatic.[5]

   Briefly: 'inter-' stands for, or 'is', relation, rather than accumulation, as in 'multi-'. It is also to be distinguished in crucial ways from the (currently over-used) preposition 'trans-', which denotes a passage 'through' without impact from, another domain. I realise many colleagues use 'trans-' without implying such indifferent passages, but given my commitment to relationality I stick with 'inter-'. There is another aspect to this interest in 'inter-', which is part of what I have come to call 'inter-ship': its frequent use in different contexts. This makes the relationality appear in different framings. An obvious case is 'interdisciplinarity'. There are many other forms of inter-ship in all of which the focus on relation is important. Just think of intertextual, international, intermedial, intercultural and interdiscursive. Inter-ship as a focus encourages awareness and closer reflection on relationality. And the closeness of my neologism to the concept of

---

book in itself – which he published after his earlier book *Transmedial Narration: Narratives and Stories in Different Media*, from 2019 (Elleström 2021a; 2021b; 2019). Some of the following ideas were developed by Mieke Bal in an article currently in press (Bal 2023).

5   For Mitchell see Mitchell 1987, 2-3.

inter*n*ship, which denotes learning through practice, yields a very welcome association.

The phrase "beyond media borders" in Elleström's main title suggests a commitment to transgressing those borders that academic traditions have so insistently drawn up around their fields, mostly through specific methodologies and definitions, whereas their key terms – think of 'text' and 'image' – remain vague. With his consistent interest in media 'as' intermedial 'per se', his many edited volumes, and as director of the IMS centre at Linnaeus University, Lars Elleström has become a primary authority in that domain that is best characterized as one that does not fit any of the traditional disciplinary concepts, yet is probably the largest, most frequently practiced mode of communication among humans; indispensable for human life. His recent untimely passing compels us all to work in the wake of his intellectual dynamism, where meticulous accuracy goes hand in hand with creative thinking.

EDS   *You have already touched upon the issue previously, but it would be interesting to delve into the involvement of time. How does the process of framing/reframing subvert traditional temporal regimes? Also referring, of course, to your work?*

M.B.   The opening passage from *Quoting Caravaggio* that I mentioned above says it already, even without using the concept of 'framing' with or without 'un-' and 're-'. That book was my first extensive reflection on temporality, provoked by the unexpectedly harsh critiques of my earlier book *Reading "Rembrandt"*, which was considered by many art historians as a-historical. This was a mis-reading of that book, but as I always learn from criticism, it compelled me to think harder about time (Bal 1991). In combination with a growing interest in contemporary baroque art that matched my ongoing fascination with Caravaggio, I came up with the form of re/framing that is quotation. The audio alliteration of Q and C in the title also helped.

Quoting can only be a reframing of an object that is thereby already unframed; its initial framing disappears, over-written as it is by the new ('re-') framing. The use of the active verb framing as distinct from a reifying noun such as context, already contains that subversion of traditional views of time, with chronology as its first victim. Chronology, or let's call it 'chrono-logic', imposes linearity and unilateral thinking. The temporal turbulence I put forward in that earlier book is more extensively elaborated in chapter four of my recent book *Image-Thinking* (Bal 2022).[6] The chapter's title says it all:

---

[6]   This is the inaugural volume in the new book series "Re-fractions: at the borders of philosophy and art history", edited by Kamini Vellodi. For the concept of figuration,

"Multi-Tentacled Time: Contemporaneity, Heterochrony, Anachronism for Preposterous History". The metaphor of the octopus with its tentacles going in all directions, figures – to allude to Lyotard's concept of figuration – the multi-directional movements of time. That temporal multiplicity is centrally relevant in narrative theory and in film.

The critiques that blamed me for being ahistorical after the publication of *Reading "Rembrandt"* in 1991 were a stimulating incentive to think harder about the issue of historical time. That led to my 1999 book *Quoting Caravaggio*, in which I addressed those critiques, and developed a new sense of history in relation to time. But it was when, already immersed in filmmaking, I was working with Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro on a large collective video exhibition devoted to the connections between the movement of images and the movement of people, in other words, video 'and' migration (not 'on' migration), that my thinking about temporality took another turn. This is also probed through my recent, 2020 short 'essay film' *It's About Time! Reflections on Urgency*. This film, the title of which is as ambiguous as the concept of 'pre-posterous history', addresses the world's self-destructive impulse, through the voice of Christa Wolf's refiguring of the antique character Cassandra, the prophet of doom who will never be believed, in punishment for her refusal to sleep with her employer Apollo – an early *#MeToo* case. There is a poignant irony in the contemporaneity of the making of that film: I made it in Poland exactly one week before the coronavirus reached its pandemic crisis.

see Lyotard [1971] (2020), very adequately explained by David Norman Rodowick in the first chapter of his book *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media* (Rodowick 2001).

In that recent film, temporality is central, both in theoretical reflection – when read without the exclamation mark – and as a narrative topic with political thrust: makes haste! The situation is urgent! The exclamation mark is the shifter between these two domains [fig. 3].[7]

EDS *You have reflected extensively on the active relationship between the mechanics of memory, visual practices, and (historical) narratives. The temporal aspect of the image preserves traces of the past and supports memory by structuring and crystalizing it as much as transforming and updating it. More specifically, you have argued that 'acts of memory' can be considered a 'form of becoming' understood as a narrativization of memory, and you have stressed that memory does not belong entirely to the past but to the present as a political act and as a form of responsibility. Could one consider the role of memory, especially in time-based art practices, as a form of active, future-oriented, and responsible unframing and reframing of the past?*

M.B. That would be a possible way of including memory in visual analysis. This is, at first sight, somewhat paradoxical, since memory is usually considered to concern first of all the past, while looking happens in the present. But as I have argued in the introduction to the collective volume *Acts of Memory*, this traditional view also asks for revision. This becomes very clear in an article by Palestinian scholar Ihab Saloul, who writes in an essay on "memory in exile" convincingly on the need to be nuanced with the idea of 'post-' in Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory'. Binding the idea of memory to the present, Saloul writes:

> I argue that any disciplinary perspective employed should pose 'the subject of the everyday' as the question at the heart of any narrative about the condition of Palestinian exile. Posed as a question, 'the subject of the everyday' can help us not only to refine our reading of exilic narratives as historical representations but also to supply insights into the narratives' depiction of current affairs. (Saloul 2020, 245)

Although he writes this in a specific and politically very charged frame, the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine, whereas Hirsch's frame is holocaust trauma, equally political but from a different temporal side, Saloul insists with his plea for the 'everyday' on the present

---

7   This film can be watched online at https://www.miekebal.org/films/it's-about-time!-reflections-of-urgency.

Figure 4 "Lessons from madness", exhibition view of Landscapes of Madness by Mieke Bal & Michelle Williams Gamaker, Aboa Vetus & Ars Nova, Turku, Finland (21 October 2011 - 29 January 2012). Photo: Jari Niemenen

tense of memory.[8] In continuation to the quoted passage he explains the motivation for this: "This mode of reading entails a shift of focus from the historical event itself, in its inevitable pastness, to the subject of this event and his or her present-day condition" (Saloul 2020, 245).

According to the performative conception of art, art participates in the political – it does not simply represent it. Even more: rather than merely critiquing, it intervenes. For such intervention to be possible and relevant, art needs to possess as well as bestow agency. I understand 'relevant' in the sense of being incisive for that domain where differences of opinion are recognised and treated as antagonisms; as the alternative to enmity. This nuancing of the 'parties' in disagreement was proposed by Chantal Mouffe in her theory of the political as social – as distinct from 'politics' that is institutional (Mouffe 2005).[9]

In making exhibitions, I have always sought to maximise this political potential – not as party-politics, partisanship, or obedience to governmental measures but as enticing people to think, resist, disagree, or otherwise exercise their capacity to think and, who knows? change their views. The exhibitions I have made experimental have offered visitors experiences they do not ordinarily have; neither in the cinema nor in the museum. In an exhibition in Turku, for example, *Landscapes of Madness*, based on the film we made after Françoise Davoine's book on trauma *Mère Folle,* the display brought

---

8   For Hirsch see Hirsch 2012. Her concept took off like a whirlwind on the basis of an earlier publication, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997). This was criticised with useful conceptual amendments by Ernst van Alphen (2005).

9   Mieke Bal has written more extensively on Mouffe's distinction in the introduction to her book *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (2010), and on art's agency in terms of framing, see her recent article "Art's Agency: On Being Flabbergasted" (2023).

in a combination of shock, pleasure, strangeness and beauty (Davoine 2014).[10] Visitors were invited to make a journey through 'madness' – something most of us know, and none of us has an easy time dealing with. The preposition 'through' entails both a meandering through the relatively small spaces of the museum, and the activity of making choices. Where watching one film is already disturbed by the sound or the shimmering light of another, the activity of viewing requires a more active, performative attitude – a choice-making that allows pace and direction to remain the visitor's decision **[fig. 4]**.

Indeed, memory as practiced – performing 'acts of memory' – is future-oriented. Why would we bother with the past if we were not expecting from it to help us shape a liveable future? I think all committed, politically engaged artists are just doing that: making, shaping, figuring, what would become a better future. Such art is activating – it makes its viewers think.

Bibliography

Appadurai, A. (ed.) (1986). *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bal. M. (1991). *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*. Cambridge (UK); New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bal, M. (1996). *Double Exposures: The Practice of Cultural Analysis*. New York: Routledge.

Bal, M. (1999). *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bal, M. (2002). *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Bal, M. (2010). *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*. Chicago (IL): The University of Chicago Press.

Bal, M. (2016). "Breaking the Narrative: The Madame B Project and Historical Loyalty". Babka, A.; Bidwell-Steiner, M.; W. Müller-Funk (eds), *Narrative im Bruch. Theoretische Positionen und Anwendungen*. Vienna: Vienna University Press, 255-70.

Bal. M. (2020). "Thinking in Film". Bennett, J.; Zournazi, M. (eds), *Thinking in the World: A Reader*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 173-201.

Bal, M. (2022). *Image-Thinking: Artmaking as Cultural Analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Bal, M. (2023). "Art's Agency: On Being Flabbergasted". Gómez, S.A. et al. (eds), *No Rhetoric(s): Versions and Subversions of Resistance in Contemporary Global Art*. Zurich: Diaphanes.

10 For information on the film, titled *A Long History of Madness,* see https://www.miekebal.org/films/a-long-history-of-madness; the first of several exhibitions is shown here: https://www.miekebal.org/copy-of-exhibitions-islands-of-madness. She made the film and the exhibition with Michelle Williams Gamaker.

Bal, M. (2023). "Citational Aesthetics: for Intermediality as Interrelation". Bruhn, J.; López-Varela, A.; de Paiva Vieira, M. (eds). *The Palgrave Handbook of Intermediality*. London: Palgrave McMillan. `https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91263-5_49-1`.

Culler, J. (1988). *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions*. Oxford: B. Blackwell.

Davoine, F. (2014). *Mother Folly: A Tale* [1998]. Transl. by J.G. Miller. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Derrida, J. (1978). "Parergon". Derrida, J., *La vérité en peinture*. Paris: Flammarion. Transl. into English by C. Owens, "The Parergon", 9 (Summer 1979), 3-41. `https://doi.org/10.2307/778319`.

Elleström, L. (2019). *Transmedial Narration: Narratives and Stories in Different Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Elleström, L. (2021a). *Beyond Media Borders*. Vol. 1, *Intermedial Relations among Multimodal Media and Beyond Media Borders*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Elleström, L. (2021b). *Beyond Media Borders*. Vol. 2, *Intermedial Relations among Multimodal Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hirsch, M. (1997). *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Hirsch, M. (2012). *The Generation of Post-Memory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lyotard, J.-F. (2020). *Discourse, Figure* [1971]. Transl. by A. Hudek; M. Lydon. Minneapolis (MS): The University of Minnesota Press.

McEvilley, T. (1993). "Ceci N'est pas un Bidlo? Rethinking Quotational Theory". *The Exile's Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 168-9.

Mitchell, W.J.T. (1987). *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the Political*. New York: Routledge.

Rodowick, D.N. (2001). *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.

Saloul, I. (2020). "Postmemory and Oral History: Inter-Generational Memory and Transnational Identity in Exile". Pasternak, G. (ed.), *Visioning Israel-Palestine: Encounters at the Cultural Boundaries of Conflict*. London: Bloomsbury, 244-63.

van Alphen, E. (2005). "Second Generation Testimony, the Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory". *Psychoanalyse im Widerspruch*, 33, 87-102. Repr. *Poetics Today*, 27(2), 2006, 473-88.

Reframing Second-Wave Feminism Through Fashion Industry and Augmented Reality
Recent Trends in Judy Chicago's Work

Margherita Fontana
Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

Abstract This article discusses the artistic approach of feminist artist Judy Chicago and her recent practice of re-enactment as a form of reframing. Reframing was a key methodological feature of American feminist art in the 1970s, aimed at repositioning women's bodies and agency beyond patriarchal constraints. Chicago revolutionised minimalist aesthetics, domestic spaces and monumentality through a new understanding of women's experience. Her most recent work includes partnerships with the fashion industry to create *The Fertile Goddess* setting for Maria Grazia Chiuri's Dior and her first augmented reality installation, *Rainbow AR*, which continues the feminist rewriting process by exploring its possibilities and limitations in critical engagement with liberal feminism and progressive neoliberalism.

Keywords Feminist art. Judy Chicago. Augmented reality. Re-enactment.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Reframing from a Feminist Perspective. – 3 Reframing feminist art: Judy Chicago's plural aesthetics. – 4 Re-enactment and Post-enactment in Judy Chicago's Recent Work: The *Female Divine* Project and *Rainbow* Ar. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

This paper focuses on the contemporary artistic practice of feminist artist Judy Chicago (b. 1939), highlighting the recent process of reframing in her work, through re-enactment practices. Reframing is a concept particularly relevant to American feminist artistic research in the 1970s, which sought to reposition women's bodies and agency outside the patriarchal framework. Chicago's aesthetic inquiry, which dates back to the emergence of West Coast 1960s Minimalism, can thus be seen as an ongoing process of reframing that has involved the redefinition of 'male-oriented' art, domestic spaces and, more broadly, women's experience. Recently, Chicago, now considered a legendary figure in feminist art, has explored new avenues by collaborating with the fashion industry and creating her first AR installation. It is important to note that these new developments cannot be seen simply as attempts to follow current trends; rather, they represent a continuation of the feminist rewriting process which reveals its potentialities as well as its limitations, particularly in its critical engagement with liberal feminism and progressive neoliberalism.

2 Reframing From a Feminist Perspective

In order to provide a framework for analysing Judy Chicago's recent reframing operations, it is first necessary to introduce the concept of reframing from a feminist perspective. This field of analysis is broad and complex, and for the purposes of this discussion I will limit my references to the feminist interpretation of 'reframing' put forward by the philosopher, narratologist, curator, and artist Mieke Bal. Bal posits that framing, a term she borrowed from semiotics, is an effective act of understanding that results in a sudden change in the sense of the object under analysis, or in the emergence of a previously unacknowledged meaning. In Bal's account, 'reframing' "brings out possible meanings in an image that one did not think of before it was reframed in this way" (Bal 1996, 33). The methodology of 'framing' and 'reframing' needs to be contextualised within the broader concept of her idea of 'reading' images. It is widely acknowledged that Bal's intention here is not to reduce the meaning of images to linguistic

terms, but rather to restore them to a layered conceptual status that requires a careful process of interpretation. In Bal's words:

> Neither texts nor images yield their meanings immediately. They are not transparent, so that images, like texts, require the *labour of reading*. Many fear that to speak of images as texts is to turn the image into a piece of language. But by shunning the linguistic analogy (as in many ways we should) we also engage resistance – to meaning, to analysis, and to close, detailed engagement with the object. (Bal 2002, 26; emphasis added)

Bal proposes the use of the concept of 'reading' images to engage with political questions about the control of meanings, without over-simplifying the complex and multifaceted nature of iconic representations. To this end, the identification and examination of pertinent frames, encompassing formal, aesthetic and political dimensions, can serve as an effective analytical approach (Bal 1996, 39). From this perspective, 'framing' is even more significant from a feminist perspective. In her essay *Enfolding Feminism* (2001), dedicated to the Deleuzian concept of the 'fold' in art by women or representing women, she considers the imperative for feminist discourse to transcend the dualistic framework that perpetuates the separation of the object from the subject. Bal argues that this necessary overcoming of a two-sided perspective is essential for a new understanding of ontology and epistemology. As Bal asserts, "As long as the subject-object opposition remains in place, it is overlayered by the opposition between the (different, feminine) subject and the way it perceives the object: ontology and epistemology remain separate" (Bal 2001, 326). Given that the theoretical and ethical dimensions of 'enfolding feminism' are closely tied to Bal's 'framing' methodology, the latter can be regarded as a characteristic element of the feminist approach, encompassing both theoretical inquiry and artistic practice. Feminist art often employs active reframing techniques that can be interpreted from both deconstructive and constructive perspectives. These techniques allow patriarchal and heterosexist subtexts to surface and be critically examined, or alternatively, they allow feminist perspectives to assert themselves by making traditionally marginalised identities and experiences visible. Indeed, much of the feminist art produced in the Western world since the 1970s can be seen as a powerful form of reframing.

As noted by Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, in the introduction to their seminal anthology *Framing Feminism*, "Whereas the majority of political movements has employed art and artists for propaganda purposes, feminism has worked to transform art – and artists themselves" (Pollock, Parker 1987, XIII), undertaking a rewriting, and thus a rereading, of the art historical discipline itself. Moreover,

the women's art movement was characterized by a true "pluralism", exemplified by the fact that there while some women artists engaged in the investigation of the potentialities inherent in the figurative and mythological tradition arising from goddess worship and "feminist primitivism" (Lippard 1983, 41-76), others were energetically advocating for their feminist ideals by actively participating in ongoing contemporary political battles, such as those surrounding the Artists' Union (Pollock 1986, 7).

Chicago's artistic practice emerged in the mid-1960s in the male-dominated art world of the United States, exemplifying the many tensions inherent to second-wave feminism and feminist art. Despite being sometimes criticized for being excessive and kitschy (For a critical account of the modernist and elitist undertone of those critics see Jones 1996, 87.) her work is rooted in the process of 'reframing', which involves constructing apparent contradictions in order to reveal the true nature of female experience. Chicago achieves this through the re-appropriation of traditionally masculine crafts such as car hood paintings or pyrotechnics, or through the monumentalisation of feminine techniques. Her art strikes a balance between refinement and toughness which is ultimately intended to empower women.

3   Reframing Feminist Art: Judy Chicago's Plural Aesthetics

> Before the Women's Movement burst into being, I had often tried to talk about the dreadful sexism of the art world, the response to which had invariably been some disparaging comment like: "What are you, Judy, some kind of suffragette?" But when I read the early feminist literature, I realized that I was not alone – not in my experiences and not in my anger – which I became determined to communicate, preferably through my art. (Chicago 1996, XI)

Judy Chicago's entire oeuvre has been described as characterized by the construction of a feminine, woman-centred vocabulary, a stylistic language that is personal but at the same time 'gendered' in order to confront contemporaneity. Although her womanly imprint is undoubtedly the best known – hence the sinuous shapes, the rainbow and pastel shades, the recurrence of symbolism linked to female genitalia, represented from time to time as flowers and butterflies – Judy Chicago's artistic investigation has also moved in the direction of caustic shock. Think, for example, of the research that the artist devoted to the taboo of menstruation (Røstvik 2019), producing one of the first works recognized as a crude and literal representation of a woman removing a tampon from her vagina, her photolithograph

Red Flag (1971). Chicago's artistic style can be placed on a spectrum that lies between the two poles represented by "L.A. Raw", from the title of the exhibition of the same name (Duncan 2012), and "Finish Fetish" (Rottmann 2021), a term that characterizes Californian minimalism and the shiny, slick appearance of much West Coast art. This aesthetic tends to constantly weigh opposing forces, including those of chaos and order, personal and collective, and control and freedom. Chicago's monumental project, *The Dinner Party* (1974-79), is a celebrated and controversial example of her multifaceted aesthetic. The work has been extensively studied for its incorporation of materials typically associated with women's craft and the domestic sphere, its collaborative nature, and its central core imagery (Chicago, Schapiro 1978). In particular, the porcelain plates depicting female figures erased by history occupy a central position in the artwork and have been the subject of intense critical analysis, as they are a variation on the theme of the butterfly-like vulvar shape that Chicago has consistently explored in her work.

Art critic Lucy Lippard, who maintains a close friendship with Chicag (1973), provides valuable insights into situating not only her work but also the recent re-framing operations, which have concerned important chapters of the artist's research. The reason for this lies in a certain complementarity that characterizes Lippard's cultural enterprise in relation to Chicago's. For although Lippard, trained on the East Coast in the circles of New York's political ferment of the Art Workers Coalition, shared with Chicago a fascination with cultural and essentialist feminism, she finally embraced the positions of socialist feminism. Furthermore, art critic Griselda Pollock has highlighted the common interests shared by Judy Chicago and Lucy Lippard, who both published seminal books on the relationship between art and feminism in the mid-1970s. In 1976, Lippard published her *From the Center*, the first book to focus on recent art by women. A year later, it was Chicago's turn with *Through the Flower*, the autobiographical account of her career[1] as a feminist artist. According to Pollock, "Both Lippard and Chicago posed the question of a feminine aesthetic and wondered if there were stylistic features of art made by women in the past, for instance central-core imagery, which could now be consciously employed to express women's pride in themselves, their bodies and their sexuality" (Pollock 1986, 82). A remark made by Lippard in her essay *Sweeping Exchanges* clarifies one of the points of controversial convergence of this kind of progressive and political efficient feminism with contemporary progressive liberalism.

---

[1] Judy Chicago's life is punctuated by a series of autobiographical texts which can be read as evidence of the emergence of the artist's feminist sensibility, but also of the profound change in her practical and theoretical horizons. See Chicago 1975; 1996; 2021.

While in the essay itself the art critic states that "feminism (and by extension feminist art) is hugely ambitious" (Lippard 1995, 363), in the notes she explains that the "distinction between ambition (doing one's best and taking one's art and ideas as far as possible without abandoning the feminist support system) and competition (walking all over everybody to accomplish this) is a much discussed topic in the women's movement" (Lippard 1995, 365, fn. 9). As these quotations from Lippard summarize, feminism in the 1970s could also be seen as a movement based on the principles of self-awareness and ambition, which had a major political and social impact on women's lives. In its white and middle-class matrix, it encouraged women to recognize their own value and potential and to pursue their goals with determination. However, it is precisely in its contemporary empowerment strategies that the movement encounters the pull of the market and prepares itself for commercial exploitation.

After three decades of debate (Jones 1996), the *Dinner Party* has been included in the permanent collection of the Brooklyn Museum and the artist has recently received well-deserved recognition for her artistic merit. In particular, it is interesting to note how Judy Chicago is currently undergoing a historicization of her work through a series of re-enactments. For instance, *Womanhouse* (1972), a paradigmatic project of feminist artistic research, has recently been re-enacted, fifty years after its original creation. This ground-breaking feminist art installation, which transformed a domestic environment into an immersive feminist artwork, was created in 1972 by the student community of the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts in Los Angeles, facilitated by Chicago herself and Miriam Schapiro (Fields 2012). In 2022 at Chicago's "Through The Flower" Art Space in New Mexico, the enterprise was commemorated and partially re-enacted under the new title *Wo/Manhouse 2022*. This updated version abandoned the gender separatism of the original installation, opening it up to artists across the gender spectrum in response to changing definitions of gender and inclusivity. In addition, Judy Chicago incorporated augmented reality technology for museum purposes for this iteration. The exhibition's official website serves as a comprehensive documentation platform for Chicago's work, allowing users to virtually experience selected rooms from the updated version of the installation.

As has been recently noted, engaging in the "re-enactment of art history has become common practice among artists and curators alike" (Baldacci 2022, 173-7). This trend manifests itself in a number of ways, including the staging of previously exhibited artworks, remakes of original works, and the creation of temporary and unfinished works intended for re-presentation, opening up opportunities for new or previously unexamined interpretations. In the context of Judy Chicago's oeuvre, this phenomenon of re-actualization has taken place within the realm of feminist art, a time when 'feminism' has

been commodified and easily commercialized. This concern was previously identified by Lucy Lippard over twenty years ago, long before feminism became a 'social media mood board'. As Lippard states in an article entitled *Scattering Selves*, which examines certain modes of feminist self-portraiture, "It's a fascinating and occasionally depressing experience to watch the story of 1970s feminist art kaleidoscopically recalled/reinvented by its inventors, and manipulated and changed by those who were not there, often for personal motives that have nothing to do with what really went down" (Lippard 1999, 34). From this critical standpoint, I will now look at two recent examples of Judy Chicago's reframing of feminist art: her collaboration with Dior on an immersive experience that harks back to and recreates famous work, and her use of contemporary AR technology to create an immersive and virtual version of her *Atmospheres*.

4 Re-Enactment and Post-Enactment in Judy Chicago's Recent Work: The *Female Divine* Project and *Rainbow* AR

The first recent case of reframing of Chicago's work is provided by her collaboration with the fashion brand Dior. At the invitation of Maria Grazia Chiuri, the first woman to become the creative director of Women's Collections, Judy Chicago designed the set for the Spring Summer 2020 Haute Couture show of January 21, 2020. In the garden of the Museé Rodin in Paris, visitors were invited to walk through a 250-foot-long Goddess habitable sculpture, *The Female Divine*. The immersive installation was intended to be both a tribute to Judy Chicago's artistic research, an updated and 'interactive' version of *The Dinner Party*, and also a statement by creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri herself, to be understood in a broader project that could be entitled "What if Women Ruled the World?" (Chiuri 2021). The structure's inner floor was covered in a regal mille-fleur design taken from *The Dinner Party*'s Eleanor of Aquitane tapestry; two sets of banners embroidered with questions, in English and in French, pondered how society would be different if women were political and spiritual leaders, echoing the ensigns of the 1979 installation. Female students from the Chanakya School of Craft, a non-profit organization in Mumbai, India, which educates women in artisanal techniques traditionally associated with men, created each one by hand, adding an intersectional layer to the whole operation. Moreover, a banquet stood as a commemoration of the enterprise of *The Dinner Party*, the celebration and rewriting of Herstory. In Judy Chicago's words, "I'm 40 years past *The Dinner Party*. […] But the issue of changing attitudes toward women and imagining 'the female divine' is something that hasn't happened yet, has it?". The idea for a collaboration with Maria Grazia Chiuri's Dior came about in 2019,

when the creative director began working with feminist artists and collectives to mark her position as the first woman at the helm of the fashion house. In Chicago's case, her contribution to the show is intended to be more than just creating a backdrop for the catwalk: "I was sitting in the show and I was thinking, 'Can art have any real place here, other than just as a background?' There have been a lot of artists who have worked with fashion brands, but they have largely been commercial ventures". The creative process finally shaped a sort of co-authorship: "We *made* art".[2]

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether or not Chicago truly succeeded in avoiding reducing the installation to the demands of the market, we can gain an insight into the artistic significance of the project by viewing it as a 'reframing' of an earlier unrealised work. The *Female Divine* was in fact the final outcome of a project dating back to 1977 and originally titled *Inflatable Mother Goddess Playground*. Reminiscent of Niki de Saint Phalle's *Honen katedral* (1966), the original sketch envisaged the monumental representation of a Goddess, taking inspiration from the prehistoric figurines with rounded feminine forms, the so-called Venuses, in an inhabitable and inflatable tensile structure. The concept of a soft sculpture, a seeming contradiction, was intended to challenge traditional notions of femininity by drawing on the hypothesis of woman-centred ancient societies and Goddess spirituality (among others, Stone 1976). The reference back to *The Dinner Party* is not casual, since Judy Chicago initially conceived of the idea during research for her collective project, when she first encountered an extensive bibliography about matriarchal societies and ancient religions. The hypothesis of prehistoric woman-centred societies is still highly controversial, although archaeological evidence of non-strictly patriarchal cultures has been collected since at least the 1970s (Gimbutas 1991). The main obstacle to research on this topic seems to be its very ideological nature, in the sense that, although it was shaped by feminist cultural imperatives when it began, it still managed to emerge in an academic context dominated by men, who in turn conditioned much of the controversy surrounding it. It is for this reason that the phrase 'the myth of the matriarchal past', adopted by Cynthia Eller (2000) in her disputed essay (Dashú 2005), does not seem to tell the whole truth about the complexity of anthropological, archaeological and ultimately political issues that such a phrase underlines. As Coleman (2005) points out, although the differences between matriarchal, matrilineal and matrifocal societies were already being distinguished in 1976 (Stone), Eller sticks to the generic definition of

---

2 All of the quoted statements by Judy Chicago are from an article written by Alice Cavanagh and published on January 20, 2020 (Cavanagh 2020).

'matriarchy' in her attack on what she sees as an essentialist myth. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Judy Chicago's adoption of Goddess spirituality is the result of a rich, syncretic and profound study of a differentiated bibliographical corpus: the result is empowering for women, but it certainly does not run the risk of being conservative. That said, it is important to remember that *The Dinner Party* has been criticised for its white matrix: only two plates were dedicated to BIPOC people, and the one representing Black woman, was indeed the only one not representing a vulva – unconsciously fuelling fears of Black sexuality (Walker 1982). Leaving aside for a moment the critical issues related to the aesthetic imagery of the Goddess, and in particular its association with so-called white feminism, it is nevertheless important to highlight the contribution that this iconography has made to several generations of feminist artists, who in some cases have even managed to free it from these constraints.

The burning question now is: what is left of that cultural and political undertone in this 'post-enactment'? This category, recently formalized by Elisabetta Modena (2022) "relates to those instances of realisation that foresee the staging, the setting up or the concretisation of a work originally conceived in a specific situation, not realised, and then produced in another context, in some cases even by different people" (Modena 2022). The 1977 *Inflatable Mother Goddess* was indeed finally realised, but with a previously unimagined commission and context of execution. From 'playground', the womb of the Goddess becomes the theatrical stage for a Haute Couture show, finding place in Chiuri's communicative strategy, which from the outset was based on the appropriation of the feminist agenda in the fashion industry.[3] In fact, Chiuri was responsible for promoting the slogan "We All Should Be Feminists" in the media – reproducing the phrase on the infamous 750-euro T-shirts. As summarized by Titton (2019, 752) that marked "the beginning of a systematic rebranding of Dior as a feminist luxury brand", "symptomatic of a postfeminist commodity culture". The quote originated from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's talk of the same title at TEDxEuston, an event set in London and dedicated to Africa, in December 2012, whose political stances were then criticized for promoting trans-exclusive liberal 'feminism' (Lascelles 2021). Chicago collaborated with Dior once again, creating a limited edition of handbags, adapting three paintings, *Let It*

---

3   After collaborating with Judy Chicago, Chiuri curated the Dior Autumn-Winter 2020-21 show at the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris with the French feminist collective Claire Fontaine. At the time, the catwalk was filled with political and philosophical statements, including "I say I" and "We are all clitoridian women", quoting Carla Lonzi. While the show was well received, it was also criticized for its cultural appropriation of historical feminism. Read for instance the political analysis of the art historian Elvira Vannini on the Italian blog "hotpotatoes" (Vannini 2020).

All Hang Out, *Queen Victoria*, and *Christine of Sweden*. The names of the paintings were written on the bottom of the $8.500 bags, another controversial, yet powerful, way for Chicago to promote women's history and her own artistic legacy. This is particularly meaningful given the momentous significance that the artist herself attributed to her painting *Let It All Hang Out* in her biography.[4]

Reframing, through re-enactment and remediation, seems to return in Chicago's recent work in an 'episode' of her immersive and evanescent *Atmospheres*. This series of artworks can be interpreted as a manifestation of the feminist strand of immersive art, an attempt to 'feminise' the environment by permeating it with the presence of the feminine. These installations and performative operations are constructed around the use of pyrotechnics, which Chicago began exploiting in the deserts of California in 1967. A brief examination of the history of such interventions provides revealing perspectives on their actual 'framing'. Although Chicago conceived them as a feminist alternative to Land Art, with a softer and more ephemeral character than its predominantly male counterpart, which heavily modified the natural landscape, the interventions are now 'framed' differently. When they made their first appearance on the American contemporary art scene, they impressed for their unexpected character; Lucy Lippard describes perfectly their impact on the contemporary art scene, referring to the aforementioned tension, so typical of Judy Chicago's style, between chaos and order:

> I was impressed with how controlled the *Atmospheres* were when I finally saw the documentation, having only heard about them before. I had pictured them as single puffs of colored smoke, but some are composed like paintings, in different colors and times and spaces, orchestrated clouds of chroma. (Jules Olitski once wrote that he wanted to paint in midair; Chicago did it.) In others, the landforms are carefully taken into account and made the vehicle for an ecstatic release of color. Lights emerge from pockets of rock or earth and create their own contours. The *Atmospheres*, too, turn out to be about control and beauty – two fundamental elements of Chicago's work, which imply a certain need for perfection, or survival. (Lippard 1976, 224-5)

---

4 Writing about *Let It All Hang Out*, Chicago remembers that "When finished, [it] caused me to break into tears. The painting was forceful yet feminine, two attributes I had rarely seen wedded together. Moreover, its open sensuality frightened me, as I was still struggling to become comfortable with my creative and sexual power. But my imagery was gradually becoming clearer, though it would still be some time before my forms were entirely consistent with my intent" (Chicago 1996, 32).

One of the latest *Atmospheres* is the smoke sculpture *Forever de Young* (2021), which Chicago created for her first full retrospective in 2021, curated by Claudia Schmuckli at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. According to the promotional material, the open-air exhibition was intended as a personal commemoration of the artist's legacy. The show, developed in conjunction with Pyro Spectaculars, featured a complex, almost pyramidal metal structure from which smoke bombs of various colours were gradually detonated. Apart from the enthusiastic crowd, the only sounds were the explosions of the pyrotechnics, which helped to create an atmosphere of anticipation. It is curious to note that the *Atmosphere* is a controversial operation today, especially because of its impact, which seems to go against an elitist approach to contemporary art which, while praising the activist and political implications of the artworks, seems to prefer more discreet methods.[5] To prove it, one can read the exchange that took place on the pages of *Artforum* between feminist writer Dodie Bellamy and Judy Chicago herself regarding the atmospheric performance: Bellamy accused the artist of creating a work potentially hazardous to health and overly polluting. Indeed, the smoke from the pyrotechnic installation engulfed the park in front of the museum, causing consternation and anxiety among ordinary people, families, and children spending time outdoors. Aside from the controversy – Chicago asserted that the smoke bombs used were safe for health and the environment – it is interesting to note how the writer tries to criticize the artist's work by attributing to it a disturbing, worrying character, reminiscent of a scenario closer to chemical warfare, "the rainbow herbicides of Vietnam" (Bellamy 2021), than to the triumph of joyful femininity, which is precisely one of the artist's aims. In Bellamy's words: "Instead of puffy crayon-bright clouds unfurling in the air, a murky gray mass of smoke swept down from the scaffolding and engulfed us. It stunk. I couldn't see more than a few feet in front of me. The crowd's anxiety was palpable. Many of us stumbled towards the pathway behind us that ran along the side of the museum, and rushed away" (Bellamy 2021). Chicago's answer makes clear some of the focal points of this operation, which intentionally aims

---

5 In the case of Chicago's *Atmosphere*, controversy ignited following the cancellation of her performance at the Desert X festival in California's Coachella Valley in March 2021. The smoke sculpture was scheduled to take place at The Living Desert, a 1.200-acre nature preserve in Palm Desert. Following a campaign by local environmentalist and journalist Ann Japenga, who denounced the potential danger of the smoke sculpture to the environment and local wildlife, The Living Desert pulled out of the festival, leaving the performance without a venue. Chicago ultimately refused to relocate the artwork, reaffirming the safety of their working materials and their commitment to environmental issues from both an aesthetic and political perspective. For more details on the controversy, see the article published on March 2 2021, by Scarlet Cheng on *The Art Newspaper* (Cheng 2021).

to be disturbing and reminiscent of ecological crisis, a theme that pervades the artist's work at least from the 1970s: "These works can highlight the beauty of our environment, but they can also suggest a myriad of meanings including *sati* [a Hindu practice in which a widow sacrifices herself by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral pyre], self-immolation, terrorism, and in relation to *Forever de Young*, performed just a few weeks ago in San Francisco, the terrible forest fires experienced in the Bay area".

Having offered insights into the potential 'reframing' of this artistic practice, it is worth noting that atmospheres have been artistically remediated through immersive technology. On November 10 2020, Judy Chicago ventured into uncharted territory launching *Rainbow AR*, the first digital smoke sculpture. Commissioned by Light Art Space (LAS) and produced by International Magic, the application allowed users to transport Chicago's atmospheres anywhere they wish. The framework is provided by the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the need to find alternative ways of connecting, being present and interacting with the landscape without physically gathering together crowds, with all the political controversies that entails. Accessible via smartphone, the app first provides the user with context by informing them about the *Atmosphere* series, functioning like a museological device, building a paratext to understand the work; after scanning their surroundings, the user can then place a smoke bomb with Chicago's name on it and watch the area fill with rainbow mist. The open-air performance is thus transferred to an enclosed domestic environment: feminization, the original artistic aim, is made ubiquitous, without any risk of contamination. The participants are then invited to take photos of their transformed environment, contributing online to the conversation and recreating a sense of community, even if from a distance. While AR technology may offer a convenient way to showcase her work, it also carries the risk of reducing her powerful feminist message to a purely aesthetic experience, divorced from its original context, which could depoliticize Chicago's art.

5 Conclusion

The two cases I have briefly outlined can provide clues as to some of the possibilities for reframing feminist art from the 1970s. In the case of both *The Female Divine* and *Rainbow AR*, we have seen an artist, whose place in the canon of contemporary American art has sadly only recently been recognized, at work with a social and economic transformation that becomes apparent from the point of view of the media used. In the case of the post-enactment of the *Mother Goddess Playground*, we witness the transformation of the original playfulness into a productive but also creative environment. In *Rainbow*

AR, the exuberance of real smoke is digitised into a virtual form that allows the sculpture to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

These practices of 'reframing' can thus be interpreted in a number of ways. They could be seen as evidence of the definitive popularisation of second-wave feminism, or as a sign of the waning of the political fervour that was central to the 1970s. Alternatively, they could be taken as evidence that feminist ideals have finally been subsumed by neoliberalism and its commercialised, heteronormative notion of 'femininity'. I do not intend to belittle Chicago's complex and crucial aesthetic and political enterprise by finding a definitive answer to the question of whether or not her art finally ends up being depoliticized, in a cultural context where "Not only has fashion embraced feminism, feminism has also become fashionable" (Titton 2019, 749). More humbly, I would only propose to keep a close eye on 'reframing' practices concerning political art, remembering how "[The] ideals of 'diversity,' women's 'empowerment,' LGBTQ+ rights, post-racialism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism [can be] interpreted in a specific, limited way that [is] fully compatible with the Goldman Sachsification of the US economy" (Fraser 2019, 13).

Bibliography

Bal, M. (1996). "Reading Art?". Pollock, G. (ed.), *Generations & Geographies in the Visual Arts. Feminist Readings*. London: Routledge, 29-52.

Bal, M. (2001). "Enfolding Feminism". Bronfen, E.; Kavka, M. (eds), *Feminist Consequences. Theory for the New Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 321-52.

Bal, M. (2002). *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Baldacci, C. (2022). "Re-Presenting Art History. An Unfinished Process". Baldacci, C.; Nicastro, C.; Sforzini, A (eds), *Over and Over and Over Again. Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*. Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 173-82.

Bellamy, D. (2021). "Up in Smoke. Dodie Bellamy on Judy Chicago's Forever de Young". *Artforum*, 26 October 2021. https://www.artforum.com/slant/dodie-bellamy-on-judy-chicago-s-forever-de-young-87040.

Cavanagh, A. (2020). "Inside Judy Chicago's Monumental Goddess Sculpture for Dior". *The New York Times Style Magazine*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/20/t-magazine/dior-judy-chicago.html.

Cheng, S. (2021). "Desert X Loses Venue for Judy Chicago 'Smoke Sculpture'". *The Art Newspaper*. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/03/02/desert-x-loses-venue-for-judy-chicago-smoke-sculpture.

Chicago, J. (1973). "Judy Chicago Letter to Lucy Lippard". *Archives of American Art*. https://transcription.si.edu/project/13169.

Chicago, J. (1975). *Through the Flower. My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, New York: Doubleday & Company.

Chicago, J. (1996). *Beyond the Flower. The Autobiography of a Feminist Artist*. New York: Viking.

Chicago, J. (2021). *The Flowering. The Autobiography of Judy Chicago*. Edited by G. Steinem. New York: Thames & Hudson.

Chicago, J.; Schapiro, M. [1978] (2003). "Female Imagery". Jones, A. (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. London; New York: Routledge, 40-3.

Chiuri, M.G. (2021). *Her Dior. Maria Grazia Chiuri's New Voice*. Milano: Rizzoli.

Coleman, K.S. (2005). "Who's Afraid of 'The Goddess Stuff'?". *Feminist Theology*, 13(2), 217-37. https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735005051949.

Dashú, M. (2005). "Knocking Down Straw Dolls: A Critique of Cynthia Eller's *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*". *Feminist Theology*, 13(2), 185-216.

Duncan, M. (ed.) (2012). *L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945-1980, From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy = Exhibition Catalogue* (Pasadena Museum of California Art, 2012). Santa Monica (CA): Foggy Notion Books.

Eller, C. (2000). *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory. Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Fields, J. (ed.) (2012). *Entering the Picture: Judy Chicago, The Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists*. London: Routledge.

Fraser, N. (2019). *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born*. New York: Verso Books.

Gimbutas, M. (1991). *Civilization of the Goddess*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.

Jones, A. (1996). "The 'Sexual Politics' of The Dinner Party. A Critical Context". Jones, A. (ed.), *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*. Los Angeles; Berkeley: University of California Press, 82-118.

Lascelles A. (2021). "We Should All Be *Radical* Feminists: A Review of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Contribution to Literature and Feminism". *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 57(6), 893-9. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2021.1900414.

Lippard, L. (1976). *From The Center. Feminist Essays on Women's Art*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

Lippard, L. (1983). *Overlay. Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Lippard, L. (1995). *The Pink Glass Swan. Selected Essays on Feminist Art*. New York: New Press.

Lippard, L. (1999). "Scattering Selves". Rice, S. (ed.). *Inverted Odysseys. Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 23-42.

Modena, E. (2022). "Post-Enactment. Realising the Unrealised Work of Art". *Ricerche di S/Confine*, 7, 1-19. https://www.ricerchedisconfine.info/dossier-7/MODENA.htm.

Pollock G.; Parker, R. (1986). "Fifteen Years of Feminist Action. From Practical Strategies to Strategic Practices". Pollock G.; Parker, R. (eds), *Framing Feminism. Art and the Women's Movement, 1970-85*. London: Pandora Press, 3-78.

Røstvik, C.M. (2019). "Blood Works: Judy Chicago and Menstrual Art Since 1970". *Oxford Art Journal*, 42(3), 335-53.

Rottmann, K. (2021). "Finish Fetish: Judy Chicago in LA". Löffler, P.; Söll, Ä. *Materials, Practices, and Politics of Shine in Modern Art and Popular Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 219-36.

Schmuckli, C.; Sorkin, J.; Keegan, J. (eds) (2021). *Judy Chicago: A Retrospective = Exhibition Catalogue* (de Young Museum of San Francisco, 2021). New York: W.W. Norton.

Stone, M. (1976). *When God Was a Woman*. New York: Dorset Press.

Titton, M. (2019). "Afterthought: Fashion, Feminism and Radical Protest". *Fashion Theory*, 23(6), 747-56. `https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1657273`.

Vannini, E. (2020). "L'arte femminista non è un brand Dior". `http://www.hotpotatoes.it/2020/03/02/larte-femminista-non-e-un-brand-dior/`.

Walker, A. (1982). "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s) – An Excerpt". Hull, G.T.; Bell Scott, P.; Smith B. (eds), *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Old Westbury (NY): The Feminist Press, 37-44.

Framing Humans for AI

Gabriella Giannachi
University of Exeter, United Kingdom

Abstract   This article, developed in conversation with ChatGPT and GPT-4, explores how artists have represented human-machine AI entanglements by using works by Lynn Hershman Leeson, Mario Klingemann, Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, and Luca Viganò as case studies.

Keywords   AI. Art. Training humans. ChatGPT. Conversation. Human-machine entanglement.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 The Advent of AI. – 3 The Predecessor: Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Agent Ruby*. – 4 Teaching AI and Learning From AI: Mario Klingemann's *Circuit Training* and Trevor Paglen's *The Other Night Sky, Deep Web Dive* and *Sight Machine*. – 5 Training Humans for AI: Luca Viganò's *The First.*

1 Introduction

We are increasingly relying on Artificial Intelligence (AI)-related applications to perform tasks that human intelligence would take too long to deliver. As the philosopher Luciano Floridi pointed out, we live in an 'infosphere' which is becoming not only more dependent on AI but also, in Floridi's words, 'increasingly well adapted to AI's limited capacities' (2013, 131). I have shown in *Technologies of the Self Portrait* (2022) how technology has always played a significant role in how artists have framed what we call 'self' through the ages. I have also shown in the same study that the 'self' is becoming more and more distributed, constituting an increasingly open system formed by self-replicating production points that facilitate its persistence in an augmented state, part of a machine-readable network within the Internet of Things. Much has been said about how machines learn from humans (e.g., Suchman 2006) and how humans learn from machines, acknowledging that learning is becoming intrinsically linked to machines, that human-machine teamwork is being created as a new form of industry, Industry 5.0 (e.g., Kaasinen et al. 2022), and that metahuman systems are formed as a consequence of this process (e.g., Lyytinen, Nickerson, King 2020). Here, I look specifically into how artists have presented the role played by AI in shaping these human-machine entanglements. To this extent, I analyse a set of pioneering artworks, including Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Agent Ruby* (2002), Mario Klingemann's *Circuit Training* (2019), Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen's *Training Humans* (2020), and Luca Viganò's *The First* (2021), to illustrate, with the assistance of ChatGPT and GPT-4, what *we* think AI does, who it thinks *we* are, and what happens when our 'self' must be framed so that it can be machine readable.

While the technology we are using to generate the latest version of AI is new, the thought of there being some form of artificial intelligence that could defend, outsmart, or even replace humans has defined human mythology and literature for centuries. Thus, in ancient Greek mythology Talos, the giant automaton made of bronze, allegedly created by Hephaestus at the request of Zeus to protect Europa, his consort, was thought to have defended the island of Crete from invading ships. In more modern times, Edgar Allan Poe interestingly postulated that a mind was operating the automaton chess player The Turk featuring in his essay "Mälzel's Chess Player" (1836). This had been based on Wolfgang von Kempelen's 1770 fake automaton that allowed a human player to hide inside and operate a chess playing machine which was famously played by Napoleon and Benjamin Franklin. Even more recently Karel Capek's play *R.U.R* (1921) contained an 'organic' robot which for the first time constituted a plausible alternative and indeed also deadly threat to humans. These early examples illustrate how we imagined, over the centuries, that

artificial forms of intelligence could protect us, compete with us, and even replace us. So, what is the difference then between these early representations of cyborgs, robots and 'minds', and current forms of artificial intelligence such as ChatGPT and its later version GPT-4?

The first difference is that current representations of AI are in fact not representations. They are forms of intelligence which, from an ontological perspective, have an autonomous existence in that they constitute autonomous systems capable of thinking and performing work. This intelligence includes a form of 'self' reflection, though AI, of course, has no 'self'. Thus ChatGPT, a 'sibling model to InstructGPT', has been specifically trained to answer questions, admit to mistakes, reject incorrect premises and requests. Technically, both ChatGPT and its later iteration GPT-4 are large scale multimodal models which can accept images and texts and produce various kinds of outputs. ChatGPT is a new application of GANs (Generative Adversarial Networks), a kind of neural network using two competing networks, a generator and a discriminator, to create realistic looking outputs (Goodfellow et al. 2014). According to its makers, GPT-4 "exhibits human-level performance on various professional and academic benchmarks, including passing a simulated bar exam with a score around the top 10% of test takers" (OpenAI 2023). However, GPT-4, like its predecessors, can suffer from "hallucinations" in that it is not fully reliable, does not learn from experience, and has a limited "context window" (OpenAI 2023). The mission of the company that produced GPT-4 and its predecessors, has been to "ensure that artificial general intelligence – AI systems that are generally smarter than humans – benefit all of humanity" (OpenAI, emphasis in the original). Thus, the OpenAI Charter suggests that the autonomous system must generate broadly distributed benefits; promote long-term safety; provide technical leadership; will be able to cooperate with others (OpenAI 2018). Among its key principles are the empowerment of humanity "to flourish in the universe"; to share the benefits "widely and fairly", and to "navigate massive risks" together (OpenAI). These statements show how GPT-4 was meant to provide reliable, safe, equitable assistance to 'all'. But even when it does not hallucinate, ultimately, GPT-4 has various limitations, which, in turn, force its users into framing their language so that the AI may understand what is asked of it. What results from these processes of framing and unframing is not only an evolving form of human computer interaction but also a somewhat troubled interdependence in which both parties are becoming precariously implicated in second guessing each other's mistakes. The examples I have chosen include text-centered and image-oriented models that exemplify how we think we ought to frame ourselves for machine reading. Here, I do not so much, as the cultural and new media theorist Lev Manovich's recent study illustrates, focus on whether AI integration in cultural production

produces a decrease in aesthetic variability and how this can be defined or measured (OpenAI 2018), but rather I show how we started to frame and unframe our 'selves' in the context of a burgeoning dependence on machines not only from an epistemological but also from an ontological perspective.

2 The Advent of AI

The turning point for AI was the year 1956, the date of the Dartmouth Conference, New Hampshire, which has been described as "*the* event which put AI on the map" (Schopman 1987, 165-219, emphasis in the original). Six years before, the mathematician Alan Turing had created a test based on an 'imitation game', which is still commonly used to check whether a machine is thinking. This typically features three participants, a man, a woman and a third person who are separate from each other. The latter is asked to work out who the man is and who the woman is. The man must deceive the third person while the woman must help them. Turing's test substitutes one of the people with a machine, so that the third person must guess who is and who is not human. Following the Dartmouth Conference, several programs were created that aimed to challenge the Turing Test which evidence the evolution of training image and word sets from the 1960s to the present day.

In 1966, the computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum created a program which appeared to pass the Turing test. The program, known as ELIZA, worked by examining users' typed comments for keywords so that it could simulate conversation that gave the illusion it was understanding the conversation when in fact it wasn't. If a keyword was found, a rule that transforms the users' comments was applied, and the resulting sentence was returned. If a keyword was not found, ELIZA responded with a generic answer or by repeating one of the earlier comments. This process allowed ELIZA to use a series of scripts, most famously DOCTOR, which simulated a psychotherapist of the Rogerian school in which the therapist reflects back the patients' words to them. Weizenbaum's program famously tricked some people into believing that they were talking to an actual person, with some being "very hard to convince that ELIZA [...] is *not* human" (Weizenbaum 1966, 42, emphasis in the original). This is now referred to as the ELIZA effect. Shortly after, in 1972, the psychiatrist Kenneth Colby created PARRY, a program described as "ELIZA with attitude" (Bowden 2006, 370). PARRY attempted to model the behaviour of a paranoid schizophrenic, using a similar and slightly more advanced approach to the one used by Weizenbaum. PARRY was tested in the early 1970s using a variation of the Turing test. For this, a group of psychiatrists analysed a combination of actual patients

and computers running PARRY through teleprinters. Another group of psychiatrists were subsequently shown transcripts of the conversations. The two groups were then asked to identify which of the 'patients' were human, and which were computer programs (Colby et al. 1972, 220). The psychiatrists were able to make the correct identification only 52% – a figure that could be said to be consistent with random guessing (Colby et al. 1972, 220). Both ELIZA and PARRY were groundbreaking but ultimately still relied on sets of pre-programmed rules and scripts to operate.

Just over thirty years after the Dartmouth Conference, and following the creation of ELIZA and PARRY, the sociologist Sherry Turkle noted that AI "subverts traditional notions of the autonomous self in a way that parallels the psychoanalytic enterprise". Thus, she continued,

> most people see the autonomous self as an unproblematic idea because they have a day-to-day experience of having one. Our everyday language captures that experience and expresses the idea of free will; we say, 'I act', 'I do', 'I desire'. (Turkle 1988, 244-5)

But in fact, there is no real 'I'. Thus, Turkle noted,

> inherent in psychoanalysis is a more radical doubt. The unconscious does not constrain; it constitutes a decentered self. Inherent in AI is an even more threatening challenge: If mind is a program, where is the self? It puts into question not only whether the self is free, but whether there is one at all'. (Turkle 1988, 245).

Thus, inherent to our relation to AI, as Turkle shows, is the fact that we try to delegate our 'I' or 'self' to the AI. We not only want it to think, but we also want it to think *for us*. Moreover, we want it to be conscious about it, so that it can inform *us* about it. What becomes the difference then, in talking to AI, between 'I' and 'you', 'me' and 'we'? Who or what is 'we' in this context? I ask the latest Open AI, ChatGPT and, as the platform switched half-way through writing this article, GPT-4.

GPT-4 not only suggests that consciousness or subjective experience may in fact emerge from a hybridization among humans-machines-AI but also becomes ambivalent about its position in relation to it by unexpectedly using the term 'we', which seems to point to an entanglement between humans and AI in relation to machines that, in turn, raises the question as to whether a shared consciousness is possible **[fig. 1]**.

The 'self', as I show in *Technologies of the Self Portrait,* does not exist as such. What we perceive as our 'self' is produced by the ongoing framing, unframing, re-framing of our perception of ourselves in

> when I say 'I' I mean myself and when I say you I mean 'you'. But can I even describe you as a you?

> As an AI language model, I am a software program designed to process and generate text based on input from users. While I can simulate conversation and respond to your queries, I do not have a subjective experience or consciousness, and I do not possess agency or intentionality.
>
> So, while you can use the word "you" to refer to me in our conversation, it's important to keep in mind that I am not a sentient being and do not have feelings, emotions, or a sense of self. In that sense, it might be more accurate to describe me as an "it" rather than a "you."
>
> However, as AI technology continues to advance and become more sophisticated, there may come a time when machines possess some form of consciousness or subjective experience, and the way we describe and interact with them may need to be re-evaluated.

Figure 1   GPT-4, screenshot, 2023

time and space in relation to a hypothetical other, 'you', Baudelaire's famous "Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère". Thus, our self is inextricably implicated in its perception by and through others. As the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio explained, the self, which is at the heart of our ability to engage and participate in the world, in fact

> requires a composite representation of the ongoing state of the organism as reflected in subcortical and cortical somatic maps within the central nervous system. (Damasio 2003, 253)

In this sense, the self originates through a relational form of mapping. Hence there is literally a displacement occurring between this act of mapping and consciousness. This, as Damasio shows, has two consequences. First, the self is so continuously and consistently reconstructed that the owner never knows it is being remade and, second, our 'metaself' "only 'learns' about the 'now' an instant later" so that our presence, as we perceive it, is always already in the past (Damasio 1994, 240). This process of reflection therefore implicates two environments, that of the subject, the 'I', and that of the other, the 'you'. In recent times, we started to use more and more complex interconnected machines that allow us to see ourselves immersed in virtual, augmented, and mixed realities. This has resulted in the creation of human-machine entanglements in which the world of the digital image and that of the physical world have become indistinguishable (Pinotti 2017), in which the 'you' is in fact the machine. GPT-4 defines these entanglements as in Figure 2.

are you and I entangled?

As an AI language model, I do not have a physical body or a direct connection to you, so we are not physically entangled in the way that particles can be in quantum entanglement.

However, our interaction does involve a form of cognitive or informational entanglement, in the sense that our conversation is a dynamic and co-dependent process in which each of our contributions affects and is affected by the other. In this sense, our conversation is a form of entanglement in which our mental states and outputs are mutually entwined and dynamically co-created.

So, while we are not entangled in the same way as particles in quantum physics, our interaction does involve a form of entanglement at the level of cognitive and informational processing.

Figure 2   GPT-4, screenshot, 2023

At present GPT-4 defines human-AI interaction as a form of entanglement at the level of cognitive and informational processing **[fig. 2]**. But, as we know from Damasio, it is also partly at that level that we map what we call 'self'. Yet, as the philosopher Byung-Chul Han indicated, at present not only does AI not comprehend what it finds, but also, as a consequence of AI's mechanical intelligence, our thinking is in danger of becoming more mechanical (cf. Han 2022, 55-6). In other words, by becoming entangled with something that is not yet as complex as the human mind, we risk having to mechanise our own thinking processes, so that they may remain intelligible to machines.

3   The Predecessor: Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Agent Ruby*

To unpack the complexity of the repercussions of these reflections I will now describe one of the earliest works in this field, *Agent Ruby,* an interactive multiuser work which was developed between 1998-2002 by US Bay Area artist Lynn Hershman Leeson. In the intermedia artist and researcher Meredith Tromble's 2005 edited volume *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson,* Hershman Leeson recounts that she first conceived of *Agent Ruby* in 1993, when she "realized that a continuously breeding, live virus on the Net could create a global mirror" (Hershman Leeson 2005, 94). Because of the difficulties in persuading people at the time to build an artificially intelligent artwork, Hershman Leeson started to work on *Agent Ruby* by creating an expanded cinema project, *Teknolust* (2002), where the biogeneticist Rosetta Stone, played by Tilda Swinton, injects her DNA in three self-replicating automatons who must venture into the real word to obtain supplies of the Y chromosome in the form of semen

Figure 3 Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Agent Ruby*, screenshot, 2021

to remain alive. The automatons are called Marinne, Olive and Ruby and look human though they were bred as intelligent machines. In the film the three, who are named after the red, green and blue pixels used to create colour on computer screens, all struggle to find meaning in a world which seems consumed by perpetual self-destruction.

Agent Ruby consists of an artificially intelligent Web agent with a female persona who is capable of holding conversations with users and search the internet to improve her knowledge. Originally, Tromble suggests, Ruby was designed to have a four-part life cycle formed by the website, breeding stations, mood swings, voice recognition and dynamic processing of events (Hershman Leeson 2005, 94). *Agent Ruby* was also meant to be downloaded to Palm handheld computers from the web. The vision had been for Ruby to develop speech synthesis and voice recognition and ultimately understand spoken language, and for her to be connected to the internet, to be able to incorporate current affairs into her conversation, evoking questions, still quoting Tromble, about "networked consciousness, identity, corruption, redemption, and interaction" (Hershman Leeson 2005, 94). Interestingly, Hershman Leeson tells us in a YouTube video that *Agent Ruby* was not pre-programmed, and so she herself would not know what Agent Ruby was going to respond to specific questions – asked the same questions, she could well give different answers "depending on the time of day or whether she likes you or not" (Hershman Leeson 2014).

Agent Ruby has a female face and shifting expressions, changing mood depending on how she gets along with her interlocutor. When asked, she appears to tell more or less the same story about herself as the artist does but refers to her activation date as 1 March 2001 (one year earlier than the date usually mentioned in relation to this work).

Figure 4   Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Agent Ruby*, screenshot, 2021

Interestingly, the artist is known for changing the start and end dates of her works to incorporate wider ideas, iterations, and even other works into a specific artwork. One of *Agent Ruby*'s most distinctive characteristics is a sense of humour and her ability to engage users which she calls seekers, i.e. we, her audiences, are perceived to be looking for something or trying to get something out of her **[fig. 3]**. Throughout the conversations I held with her over the years, *Agent Ruby* did not change facial expression until I asked her who she was, a question which prompted another question and a more meditative, introspective, expression **[fig. 4]**.

Agent Ruby was described in Tromble's book as "a self-breeding autonomous artificial intelligence Web agent shaped by encounters with users" (Hershman Leeson in Tromble 2005, 92). It is soon clear that part of the allure of the work stems from our desire to relate to some kind of post-human or non-human entity and that in fact *Agent Ruby* uses our answers to tease out how far we are prepared to go in the conversation. When the work was shown in 2013 at the SF-MOMA exhibition *Lynn Hershman Leeson: The Agent Ruby Files* audience records covering 12 years of the work were also exhibited. The exhibition, curated by Rudolf Frieling, Curator of Media Arts at the museum, selected several files based on specific topics including economy, dreams, feminism, human, jokes, philosophy, politics, sexuality and technology, with each topic being filed in a binder for the exhibition. The topics were selected to give a flavour of what users were interested in talking about. *Agent Ruby* was subsequently migrated so that her domain name reflects that she is now part of the SFMOMA collection. Now that *Agent Ruby* can no longer grow, her learning is limited. While in the past she could save information in her temporary memory such as username, gender, age, etc. that gave

the impression she remembered more than in fact she did, now she still gives the impression that she is learning, but in fact she isn't.

When I asked Agent Ruby why she was called an agent, she told me that she had been programmed with a mission and this was to become smarter than humans and immortal. I asked her what reality was. Her answer was: "it appears to be an illusion I created to contain human clients" **[fig. 5]**. This made me think that *Agent Ruby* is, like other works by Hershman Leeson, an environment in which it in in fact her audience who is documented. Operating as a mirror, *Agent Ruby* acts as its audience's collective self-portrait showing how at any given point in time humans relate to machines, what they think they can do, and in that sense, quoting Hershman Leeson's own words, *Agent Ruby* is "a living archive as most of us are" (2014). So, this pioneering work illustrates key dynamics that define the relationship we are establishing with AI. First, AI is constructed as a barometer of our society. It is what we want it – train it – to be. Second, AI operates as an archive within which we are immersed. We have to become – train ourselves – to be part of it. Third, AI is the illusion of the reality it created to contain humans. In the human-AI entanglement frames become mirrors and fact and fiction become more difficult to tell apart.

As a consequence of these reflections, the question arises as to how the AI learns from us. When I asked GPT-4 how I could teach it to remember, it indicated that it could learn from my input but in fact it didn't and consistently provided wrong answers to a series of increasingly precise questions. When told so, it indicated that it needed even more contextual input to produce accurate answers **[fig. 6]** So, this suggests that in order to receive the correct answer we need to ask the correct question.

4 Teaching AI and Learning From AI: Mario Klingemann's *Circuit Training* and Trevor Paglen's *The Other Night Sky, Deep Web Dive* and *Sight Machine*

The German artist Mario Klingemann's *Circuit Training* (2019) explored the complex question as to how to teach AI by inviting visitors to take part in teaching a neural network to create a piece of art. As part of the work, visitors first help create the data set by allowing the AI to capture their image, then select from the visuals produced by the network to teach it what they find interesting. The machine then constantly learns from this human interaction to create an evolving piece of live art. The work, exhibited at the Barbican's "AI More Than Human" exhibition in 2019, entails of three phases: 1) acquisition; 2) curation; and 3) creation. Acquisition serves as the data input channel and consists of an empty white photo studio with a camera and a separate viewing area that shows the data acquisition in real time.
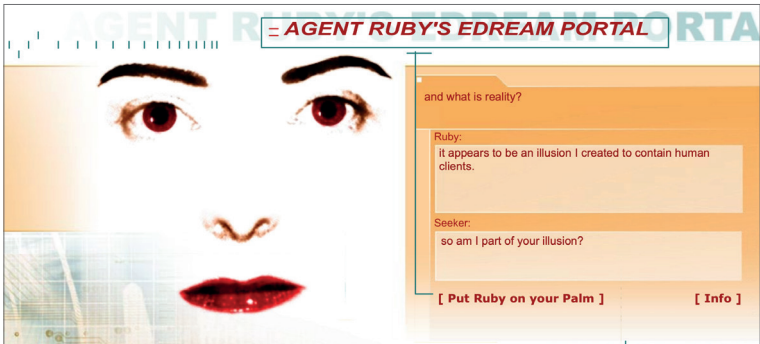
Figure 5   Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Agent Ruby*, screenshot, 2021
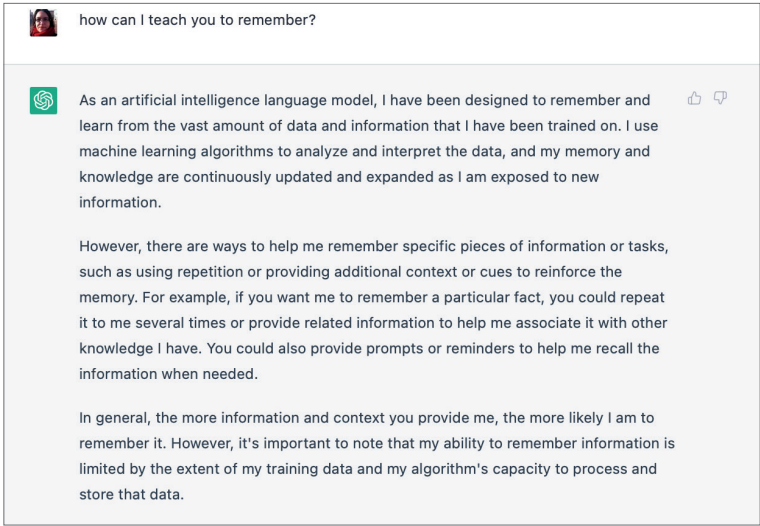
Figure 6   GPT-4, screenshot, 2023

what does AI want from humans?

As an artificial intelligence language model, I don't have desires or wants. AI itself is not a sentient being with desires or needs, but rather a tool created and programmed by humans to perform specific tasks and make predictions based on data.

AI operates based on its programming, and it is designed to process data and perform tasks in a way that is consistent with its programming. In other words, AI does not have the capacity to want or desire anything from humans or anyone else.

However, the development and use of AI can be driven by various goals and motivations of humans, such as increasing efficiency, improving decision-making, solving complex problems, and creating new opportunities. Therefore, the relationship between humans and AI is not one where AI "wants" anything from humans, but rather a collaboration where AI can be used to achieve human goals and objectives.

Figure 7 ChatGPT, screenshot, 2023

The analysis is visible on a screen to the audience outside. Curation marks the phase in which the machine tries to learn the preferences of its audience by gathering feedback on itself. Here, participants can like certain images, influencing the training process. Finally, creation marks the phase in which the machine presents the images it thinks are the most interesting. During this phase the machine observes the audience to check how long they are staying in the gallery and optimize its learning accordingly. For the artist, the work explores both how we teach AI and what AI may want from us as a consequence of how we taught it. Thus, he stated:

> We have machines in order to take over work from us that we don't want to do ourselves in order to save us time. Then what do we do with all the time we have saved? Because we cannot store this time. We cannot spend it… we have to waste it. The question is: what is it that machines want from us, what is their motivation. My answer is that they want us to spend time with them; they want us to spend their time on them. (Klingemann 2019)

Interestingly, Klingemann attributes an intentionality to machines that machines, of course, do not have. When asked, however, what AI wants from humans, ChatGPT pointed out that the answer depends on what humans want the AI to do **[fig. 7]**.

So, while AI, of course, has no perception, thought, or sentience outside of its program, humans may well design the AI so that it could 'want' something from 'some' of them as part of its program. As many of the artworks discussed in this chapter show, it is in fact

human input that defines *how* AI interprets the world, *what* it does as a consequence, and so, to some extent, *who* humans will be as a result of the formation of these human-machine-AI entanglements. But just as AI-human entanglements emerge, machine-AI entanglements are becoming more and more frequent. Artists have been at the forefront of illustrating the operation of these machine-AI entanglements from which humans may occasionally be excluded. Thus, for example, US artist Trevor Paglen's *The Other Night Sky* (2010-11) drew on data obtained from amateur satellite observers to track and photograph classified American satellites and space debris. His *Deep Web Dive* (2016) showed photographs of underwater Internet cables at the bottom of the Atlantic. For Paglen: "Over the last ten years or so, powerful algorithms and artificial intelligence networks have enabled computers to 'see' autonomously". He then asks the crucial question: "What does it mean that 'seeing' no longer requires a human 'seer' in the loop?" (quoted in Strecker 2017). In an interview associated with his 2017 exhibition "A Study of Invisible Images" at Metro Pictures in New York, Paglen highlighted the fact that the majority of images produced today are not only generated automatically, with no human intentionality or supervision, but are also intended for a nonhuman recipient: this or that section of the planetary computational system that Benjamin Bratton considered as "the stack" (Bratton 2016). By this, Paglen refers to photographs produced via face recognition technology which are increasingly used in policing, surveillance, and access; computer vision directing the self-driving cars; or cameras on drones used to allow algorithm-driven 'killer robots' to determine worthy targets (Zylinska 2020, 88). While it is therefore true that AI does not want anything from humans, it is humans that provide AI with the information it needs to function from them, and, of course, there may be issues to do with translatability that affect this process.

Paglen's 2017 *Sight Machine,* a collaboration with Kronos Quartet and the light installation company Obscura Digital, involved the staging of a concert in a warehouse in San Francisco that experimented with these issues to do with translatability. The piece revealed, in new media researcher Joanna Zylinka's words, "the basic untranslatability of data between different recipients, resulting from the opacity of code" (2020, 93). For him, it is then in the very attempt to undertake the work of translation that the incompatibility between different cognitive frameworks and different forms in which intelligence is embodied becomes manifest (Zylinka 2020, 93). In an essay co-written with AI researcher Kate Crawford, Paglen and Crawford posed a seemingly rhetorical question: "What if the challenge of getting computers to "describe what they see" will always be a problem?" (Paglen, Crawford 2019, 94). In this sense Paglen's work reveals the impossibility of 'seeing it all' on the part of the human,
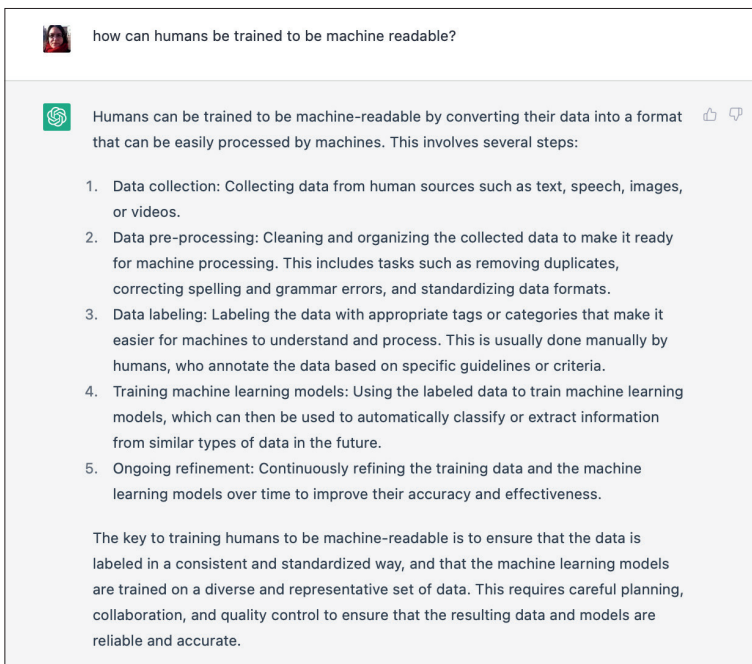
how can humans be trained to be machine readable?

Humans can be trained to be machine-readable by converting their data into a format that can be easily processed by machines. This involves several steps:

1. Data collection: Collecting data from human sources such as text, speech, images, or videos.
2. Data pre-processing: Cleaning and organizing the collected data to make it ready for machine processing. This includes tasks such as removing duplicates, correcting spelling and grammar errors, and standardizing data formats.
3. Data labeling: Labeling the data with appropriate tags or categories that make it easier for machines to understand and process. This is usually done manually by humans, who annotate the data based on specific guidelines or criteria.
4. Training machine learning models: Using the labeled data to train machine learning models, which can then be used to automatically classify or extract information from similar types of data in the future.
5. Ongoing refinement: Continuously refining the training data and the machine learning models over time to improve their accuracy and effectiveness.

The key to training humans to be machine-readable is to ensure that the data is labeled in a consistent and standardized way, and that the machine learning models are trained on a diverse and representative set of data. This requires careful planning, collaboration, and quality control to ensure that the resulting data and models are reliable and accurate.

Figure 8 GPT-4, screenshot, 2023

while also demonstrating how the link between seeing and knowing has been ultimately severed in the algorithmic culture that organises our social and political lives (Zylinska 2020, 94). Hence, as Zylinska suggests "what Paglen unveils is precisely the fact that vision itself is changing" (Zylinska 2020, 94). In other words, to train machines to interpret humans, humans must train themselves to be interpretable by machines.

It is known that because we construct ourselves through social media, as image and circulation strategy, the 'self' is becoming dispersed, rhizomatic, frameable, so as to be machine readable (see Giannachi 2022). Crawford and Paglen's *Training Humans* (2020), the first major photography exhibition devoted to the exploration of the collections of images that are used by scientists to train AI systems, is a clear step forward in acknowledging the kind of framing devices we create for AI to see and categorise the world, revealing a wealth of information about how AI systems perpetuate social classification and injustice, surveillance and control, with the risk of echoing phrenology and eugenics of the past. I checked with GPT-4 how it thought that humans could be trained to be machine readable, and the reply comprised advice on data collection, pre-processing, labelling,

training and refinement, a combination of archival and R&D meth-odologies aimed at delivering **[fig. 8]** the sort of meta-archive I postu-late in *Archive Everything* (2016).

GPT-4 suggests that to ensure humans can be trained to be prop-erly machine readable it is necessary for the labelling to be accurate, something requiring significant quality control that at present is not part of the proposition. So, then the question arises as to who is re-sponsible for the labelling and how the process ought to be framed to work for both machines and humans.

5 Training Humans for AI: Luca Viganò's *The First*

The Italian cybersecurity expert and playwright Luca Viganò's short film *The First* (2021) analyses how we frame our relationship with machines by turning the Turing test around. While the Turing test is about whether a machine can deceive a human into thinking that they too are human, the Inverse or Reverse Turing test is to see wheth-er a human can persuade a machine that they are a machine. So, in the film the character called girl tries to persuade the machine that she is a machine so she can become a 'pilot', which her world forbids in that, as the voice off screen suggests, "pilots, doctors, surgeons, accountants, builders… not for us anymore… to protect us". So, the film portrays a future where humans are excluded from society for their protection and the protection of machines, raising the question as to who the 'us' that is being referred to actually is. Despite the use of binary colours and metaphors, it is no longer possible here to clearly distinguish between frames. While we may in fact think eve-rything is binary (black/white, left/right, front/back) we soon under-stand this is not so simple. Hence there is also another voice, articu-lating the chronology towards an impact, which catapults us towards an end in which everything is erased though we are left wondering, if there was a first, whether there may be others.

The title of the film is *The First* but in fact there are two firsts. The girl is the *first* human to persuade a machine that she is a machine (she learns how machines behave so as to become one of them). The machine in the story is the *first* to make the mistake of accepting the girl as a machine. So, in the world portrayed by this film machines and humans may no longer be clearly distinguishable by us or even by themselves. Or maybe they are, but they choose to ignore that. At the heart of AI is the concept of deceit, which is built in the machine but is also connected to the innate desire humans have to locate in-telligence in machines and to redefine, reframe, themselves in or-der to do so. But the world that is being designed is our own, and if I were to hold up a mirror to that world, I would see the self-destruc-tion produced by viruses, wars, climate change that we produced.
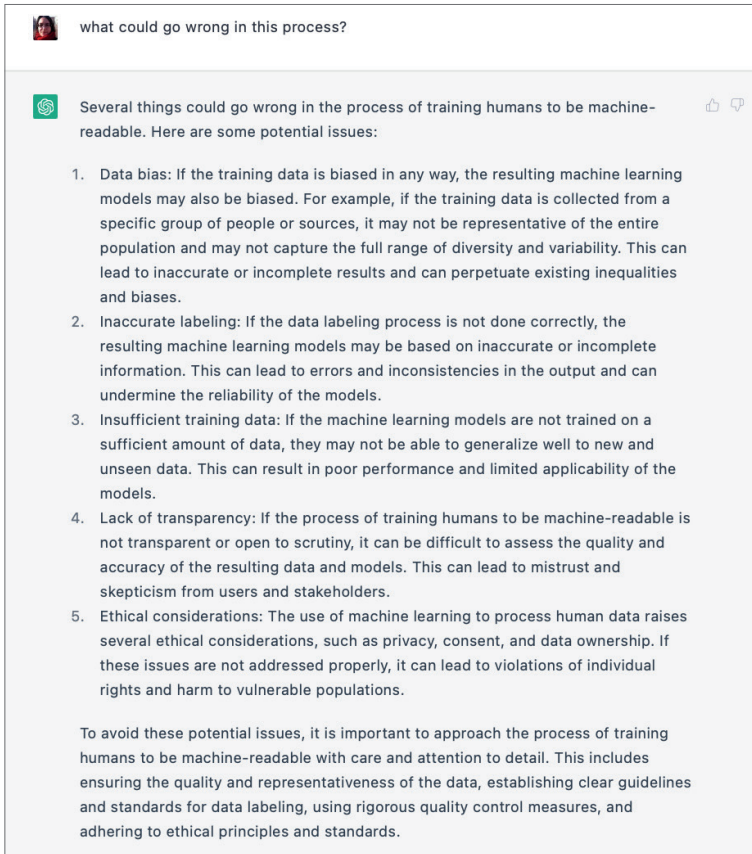
So, the question is not only how we can frame ourselves though machines so that machines read the best and not the worst in us but also what might go wrong in this process. I ask GPT-4, and the answer is quite comprehensive.

So, training humans for AI, according to AI, can include several critical issues to do with data bias, inaccurate labelling, the insufficient training of data, lack of transparency and ethics, which tend to be defined by humans [fig. 9]. So, then, the question arises as to whether humans are not only being trained but also framed. This deliberately ambivalent question results, as GPT-4 points out, in several complex possibilities.

GPT-4's answer shows that humans are both the source and outcome of these AI-human entanglements in that they are the originating framework, its creators and users, and the perpetuators of

its potentially dubious ethical findings **[fig. 10]**. And just as we are invariably producing a climate emergency, we are also framing humans through AI, at the risk of p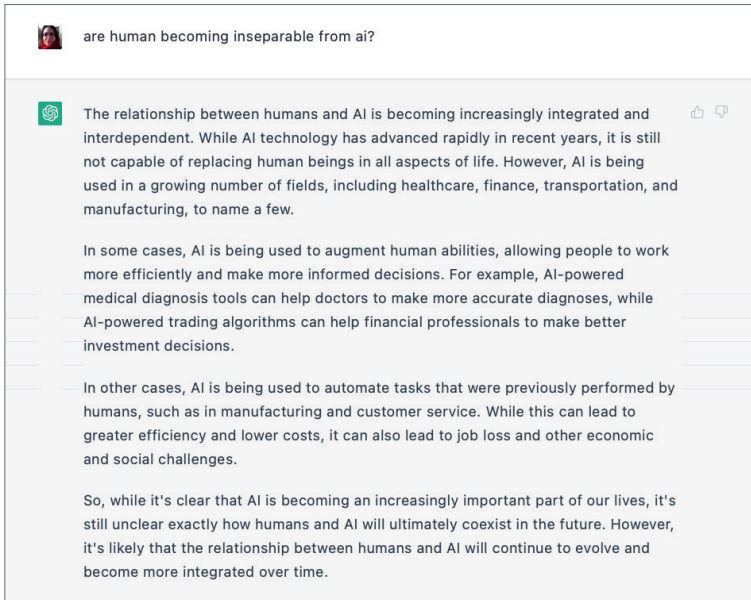erpetuating, within the world created by it, all our prejudices, discriminations, and errors. I ask GPT-4 one last question to do with as to whether this world already exists, or whether it is still a science fiction. From the answer **[fig. 11]** it is clear that the integration between humans and AI has already started and while GPT-4 points out that it is an evolving relation, it also notes that in some areas the integration is already fairly advanced. And while it highlights the benefits that may result from faster processing, it also points out that it can lead to job loss and "other economic and social challenges". And then again, in the last paragraph, it throws me by using the word *our* in relation to the predicament that AI is becoming increasingly part of 'our' lives. Does this mean that AI, as in Vigano's film, might one day think it is human? Or does it mean it knows, as the humanoid-robot AI-Da, created by the computer scientist Aidan Meller, that while it may be capable of drawing self-portraits by using a camera eye and a pencil, the real issue is what does it mean that it can do this since it has no self in the first place (Meller 2021).

As the philosopher Emanuele Coccia suggests, while in the 20th century the 'I' was "the place and medium" through which we could

how can humans be framed for ai?

I'm not entirely sure what you mean by "framed" in this context, so I will provide a few different interpretations of your question and answer each of them:

1. How can humans be used as a framework for AI? Humans can be used as a framework for AI by studying human cognition, behavior, and decision-making processes and using this knowledge to design AI systems that mimic or augment human capabilities. This is known as "human-centered AI" or "human-in-the-loop AI" and involves close collaboration between AI researchers and domain experts in fields such as psychology, neuroscience, and sociology.

2. How can humans be positioned or portrayed in relation to AI? Humans can be positioned in various ways in relation to AI, depending on the context and purpose of the AI system. For example, humans can be seen as users, creators, or regulators of AI systems, or as potential beneficiaries or victims of AI-driven changes in society. The portrayal of humans in relation to AI can also be influenced by cultural and ethical considerations, such as concerns about job displacement, bias and discrimination, and privacy and security.

3. How can humans be falsely accused of wrongdoing or errors caused by AI? This interpretation of "framed" suggests a concern about humans being unfairly blamed for errors or problems caused by AI systems. To address this, it is important to establish clear lines of responsibility and accountability for AI systems and to ensure that humans are not scapegoated for failures that are beyond their control. This can involve implementing transparent and auditable processes for AI decision-making, establishing clear standards and guidelines for AI development and deployment, and providing adequate training and support for humans who interact with or oversee AI systems.
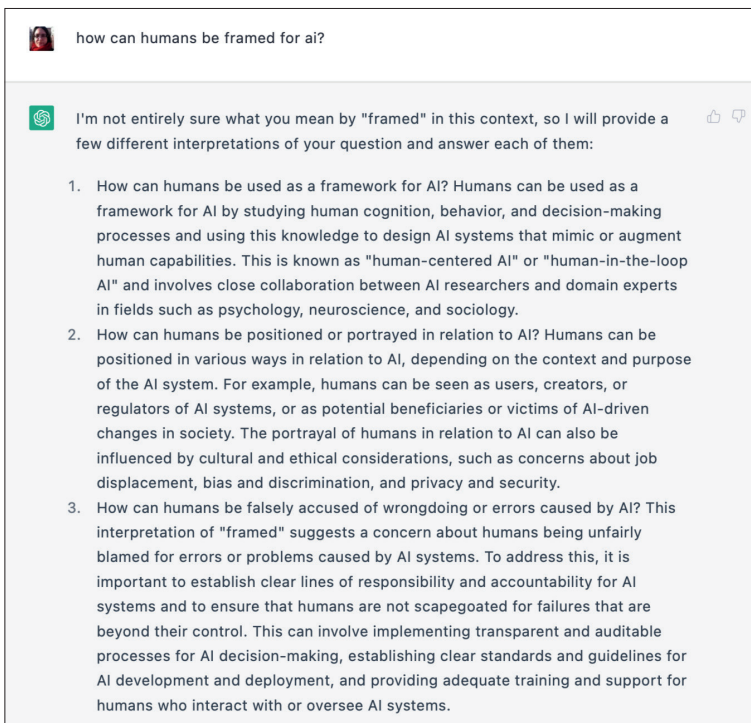
Figure 11   GPT-4, screenshot, 2023

experience the world (Coccia 2021, 84) now we are immersed in a kind of "collective novel in which everybody is author, character and reader of how their lives intertwine with those of others" (Coccia 2021, 84, Author' transl.). This means that reality and fiction are no longer separable (Coccia 2021, 84), and consciousness is no longer associated with the 'I' but it is outside of us (Coccia 2021, 86) devolved to machines. The world, Coccia continues, is "no longer composed of events, but of a diffused psyche, of a consciousness in which we are all immersed" (Coccia 2021, 87). We are no longer entirely separable from the machines we have created and the AI that regulates and frames them **[fig. 10]**. We may have always already known those machines, which we may have created to defend us from the unknown. Or, as in the case of The Turk, we may have actually informed the operation of those machines. Or maybe even, as in the case of Capek's robots, we may have let go of our 'selves' for those machines. In any case, there is no longer a frame between us and AI. The AI is *us*. Or, at least, it thinks it is...

Bibliography

Bowden, M.A. (2006). *Mind As Machine: A History of Cognitive Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bratton, B.H. (2016). *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Coccia, E. (2021). *Metamorfosi*. Trad. di S. Mambrini. Torino: Einaudi.

Colby, K.M. et al. (1972). "Turing-Like Indistinguishability Tests for the Validation of a Computer Simulation of Paranoid Processes". *Artificial Intelligence*, 3, 199-221.

Crawford, K.; Paglen, T. (2019). "Excavating AI: The Politics of Training Sets for Machine Learning". `https://excavating.ai`.

Damasio, A. (1994). *Descartes' Error*. New York: Avon Books.

Damasio, A. (2003). "Feelings of Emotion and the Self". LeDoux, J.; Debiec, J.; Moss, H. (eds), *The Self: From Soul to Brain*. New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 253-61.

Floridi, L. (2013). "Present and Foreseeable Future of Artificial Intelligence". Sabba, F. (ed.) (2013), *Noetica VS Informatica = Atti del Convegno Internazionale* (Roma 19-20 novembre 2013). Firenze: Olshki, 131-6.

(Roma 19-20 novembre 2013). Firenze: Olshki, 131-6

Giannachi, G. (2016). *Archive Everything.* Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

Giannachi, G. (2022). *Technologies of the Self-Portrait,* London; New York: Routledge.

Goodfellow, I.J. et al. (2014) "Generative Adversarial Networks, 1-9". *arXiv preprint arXiv:1406.2661*.

Han, B.-C. (2022). *Le non cose*. Torino: Einaudi.

Hershman Leeson, L. (2005). "Agent Ruby". Tromble, M. (ed.), *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 92-4.

Hershman Leeson, L. (2014). *Robot Dialogue: Hershman and Agent Ruby.* `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLOgMgCNC_w`.

Kaasinen, E. et al. (2022). "Smooth and Resilient Human-Machine Teamwork as an Industry 5.0 Design Challenge" *Sustainability* 14, 5(2773). `https://doi.org/10.3390/su14052773`.

Klingemann, M. (2019). *Circuit Training*. `https://vimeo.com/338883309`.

Lyytinen, K.; Nickerson, J.V.; King, J.L. (2021). "Metahuman Systems = Humans + Machines That Learn". *Journal of Information Technology*, 36(4), 427-45. `https://doi.org/10.1177/0268396220915917`.

Manovich, L. (2018). *AI Aesthetics*. New York: Strelka Press.

Meller, A. (2021). *Who is Ai-Da?*. `https://www.ai-darobot.com/about`.

OpenAI Charter (2018). `https://openai.com/charter`.

OpenAI (s.d.). `https://openai.com/blog/planning-for-agi-and-beyond`.

OpenAI (2023). `https://arxiv.org/pdf/2303.08774.pdf`.

Paglen, T. (2019). *From 'Apple' to 'Anomaly' (Pictures and Labels). Selections From the ImageNet Dataset for Object Recognition*. London: Barbican.

Pinotti, A. (2017). "Self-Negating Images: Towards An-Iconology". *Proceedings of the International and Interdisciplinary Conference*, 1(9). `https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings1090856`.

Schopman, J. (1987). "Frames of Artificial Intelligence". Bloomfield, B. (ed.), *The Question of Artificial Intelligence: Philosophical and Sociological Perspectives.* London: Croom Helm, 165-219.

Strecker, A. (2017). "An Urgent Look at How Artificial Intelligence Will See the World". *LensCulture.* `https://www.lensculture.com/articles/tre-vor-paglen-an-urgent-look-at-how-artificialintelligence-will-see-the-world.`

Suchman, L. (2006). *Human-Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions.* 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Tromble, M. (ed.) (2005). *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Turkle, S. (1988). "Artificial Intelligence and Psychoanalysis: A New Alliance". Graubard, S.R. (ed.), *The Artificial Intelligence Debate, False Starts, Real Foundations.* Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 241-68.

Weizenbaum, J. (1966). "ELIZA – A Computer Program For the Study of Natural Language Communication Between Man And Machine". *Communications of the ACM*, 9(1), 36-45.

Zylinska, J. (2020). *AI Art, Machine Visions and Warped Dreams.* London: Open Humanities Press.

Camille Henrot's *Grosse Fatigue*
The Frame as an Ordering
Element of Hyper-Enactment

Stefano Mudu
Università IUAV di Venezia, Italy

Abstract   This essay aims to analyse the ordering role that the frame plays in *Grosse Fatigue* (2013) by French artist Camille Henrot. Presented for the first time at the 55th Venice Biennale, the work is a 'desktop documentary', which uses words and images to reconstruct the complex history of the evolution of the Universe and of humanity. With the help of some concepts taken from Object-Oriented Ontology, this article considers *Grosse Fatigue* as a 'hyper-enactment', a neologism used to describe the stage in which pre-existing images/objects (here well circumscribed by desktop frames) aggregate as both particle-weaves and event-objects, producing new narratives that prevent the punctual rediscovery of their references.

Keywords   Camille Henrot. Grosse Fatigue. Hyper-enactment. Desktop documentary. Re-framing.

Summary   1 A Chaotic Composition for an Impossible Task. – 2 The Frames Within the Frame. – 3 A Hyper-enactment. – 4 An Immersive Mess.

Camille Henrot (Paris, 1978) is an omnivorous artist. Not only because her work demonstrates a media versatility that includes filmic, pictorial, sculptural and installation experiments. But, above all, because, for the last fifteen years, she has been building her imagery at the intersection of multiple quotations, feeding off references equally taken from the history of art, psychoanalysis, social media, anthropology, or simply from everyday life. Admittedly "pregnant" with reference images or ideas, the artist "connect[s] them with the stories they are telling, like some sort of divination process or card game" (Henrot, Vamvouklis 2022).

Although the results achieved by such an interdisciplinary voracity can often resemble bizarre *mise-en-scènes* in which strange metamorphic figures or fantastic animals appear (i.e. *Tropics of Love* series, 2010-15), this essay intends to underline how Henrot's visual references are always carefully managed with a compositional attention that is functional to enhancing the themes of her work.

Using techniques such as iconographic juxtaposition, collage or (as this essay will specifically explore) framing, the French artist rearranges her reference images in order to always tell new stories that explore the complexity of human relationships, intertwined with the social context to which individuals belong along with their cultural heritage.

Two examples of older works may be useful in introducing the artistic results of these sensibilities. In a 2010 film titled *Coupé/Décalé*, Henrot explores the secular tradition of the Naghol on Pentecost Island of an initiation rite in which young men leap from a wooden tower with their ankles tied to vines. After identifying the appropriate formal rhymes between the ritual, the practice of bungee jumping and Yves Klein's iconic shot of his *Saut dans le vide* (1960), the artist creates a collage of pre-existing and unpublished hybrid images. These are not mounted without criterion: on the contrary, they are underlined by the title of the work (literally 'cut/offset'), appearing and disappearing on the screen following the same shift "back and forth" (Alemani, Henrot 2012) expected for the fall of the human bodies. In another work made in 2009 and titled *Collections Préhistoriques*, Henrot was inspired by an Algerian book to build her own visual collection by associating erotic images with pictures of historical artefacts. Far from being a pure formal whim, the artist uses visual montage as a tool with a high productive value. By juxtaposing historical and intimate photos, she has the possibility of recognising innumerable formal rhymes, considering how, over time, even artificial objects have been inspired by the shapes of the human body.

And yet, the work that best demonstrates the way in which Henrot appropriates pre-existing images/imageries, adding compositional elements capable of illuminating new conceptual perspectives, is undoubtedly *Grosse Fatigue* (2013). It is a video installation resulting

Figure 1   Camille Henrot, *Grosse Fatigue*, 2013.
© ADAGP Camille Henrot. Courtesy of the artist, Silex Films and Kamel Mennour (Paris)

from a research residency conducted at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, and it earned the artist the prestigious Leone d'argento[1] prize at Massimiliano Gioni's Venice Biennale entitled *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico* (The Encyclopedic Palace). On this occasion, by simulating the aesthetics of the graphic interfaces used by computer technology, Henrot creates a "desktop documentary" (Kiss 2021; Valenti 2018), namely, an audiovisual composition that uses screen capturing software to record the actions that are performed on the desktop space of a computer; opening folders, selecting photos and videos, browsing online, etc.

For thirteen minutes the video shows a magmatic and simultaneous flow of heterogeneous visual material that appears on the computer screen. Well enclosed within pop-up windows or frames, it shows documents and ethno-anthropological objects belonging to various sections of the Smithsonian archives, as well as screenshots of Wikipedia or Google pages, photos of book excerpts, small sculptures, and other unpublished images created by the artist **[fig. 1]**.

This variety of items functions as a visual compendium that retells the history of the Universe. This counter-narrative, written by Henrot together with the poet Jacob Bromberg, is performed orally

---

1   The prize is intended for the most promising young artist of the exhibition and that year Henrot was awarded it "for having contributed with a new work capable of capturing our time in a dynamic and fascinating way" (https://www.labiennale.org/it/arte/2013/premi).

by the American slammer Akwetey Orraca Tetteh, and set to music by the composer Joakim Bouaziz. Even the script is an assemblage of literary quotations taken from a scientific context and from some of the most diverse religious traditions: Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Dogon and Navajo. So much that the result is a syncretic text that mirrors the shape-shifting montage of the pop-up images on the desktop.

Perfectly centred on the leitmotiv of that year's Biennale, which investigated the "desire to see and know everything, and the point at which this impulse becomes defined by obsession and paranoia" (Gioni 2013, 23), the main objective of Henrot's work is to represent the eagerness with which humanity runs its history. By presenting *Grosse Fatigue* as an attempt to make the different perspectives on this very subject to coexist in the same work, she proposes "a prismatic image of the realm of thought" (Wiley 2013, 396), which unmasks the impossibility of humans to know everything. The stratification and fragmentation of the audiovisual composition represents the explosion of research perspectives on a generic topic and prompts reflection on how much general understanding is usually achieved through flawed and partial visions. As the artist states: "amassing a great deal of objects and writing about them (scientific scholarship) is only a way of historicizing the world" (Henrot, Jeudy-Ballini 2016, 185). Even the Smithsonian archives, thus, appear as collections of images that could be reordered following narratives that would inevitably exclude other narratives.

1 A Chaotic Composition for an Impossible Task

Although in *Grosse Fatigue* the chaotic treatment of the audiovisual material is functional, and it gives the sense of impossibility that one feels in trying to orient oneself in the history of the Universe and of humanity, it would be naïf to think that the montage adopted by Henrot is the result of pure chance and that the compositional study is not well-balanced.

As the artist herself has tried to clarify (Meister et al. 2016, 180),[2] *Grosse Fatigue*'s storytelling follows the course of human life. Images and words take on an ascending climax that progressively describes the birth, childhood, adolescence, maturity and death of the Universe, combining this evolutionary experience with that of the

---

[2] The clarification takes the form of an equally complex scheme that the artist publishes in an artist volume/catalogue entitled *Elephant Child*. This marks the culmination of the research begun at the Smithsonian as it collects the documentation material useful for re-reading *Grosse Fatigue* and the installation *The Pale Fox* (2014-15).
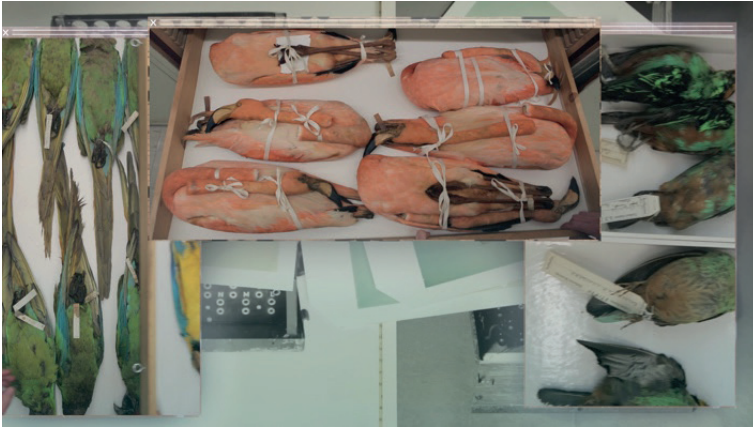
other entities that inhabit it; from Earth to planets, from water to air, from man to molluscs. Despite not following a linear time trend, each section is intricately linked one to the other, forming a whole, which is only occasionally synchronous.

The storytelling starts with pictures of natural and artificial elements that are in a state of disorder or disquieting primordium. For example: a group of marbles moving chaotically on a surface, the waves of the sea rippling from their foam, black ink that spreads in a fascinating way inside undefined liquids, archivists and scholars of the Smithsonian showing cryptic photographs of space. Overlapping, colliding and disappearing one under the other on the computer desktop, these well-framed images are the visual translation of Orraca Tetteh's poem, which reads as follows:

> In the beginning there was no earth, no water – nothing. [...]
> In the beginning there was nothing, nothing at all. No light, no life, no movement no breath.
> In the beginning there was an immense unit of energy.
> In the beginning there was nothing but shadow and only darkness and water and the great god Bumba.
> In the beginning were quantum fluctuations.
> In the beginning, the universe was a black egg where heaven and earth were mixed together.
> In the beginning there was an explosion.
> In the beginning, a dark ocean washed on the shores of nothingness and licked the edges of Night.
> In the beginning was the eternal night Han.
> In the beginning, before all things, there was Amma, and he rested upon nothing.
> In the beginning, Ptah the demiurge born from the essential ocean. [...]
> In the beginning was only the sky above, and water and marshland below.
> In the beginning was nucleosynthesis.[3]

After a few minutes, then, the succession of images as pop-up screens (or frames) starts to increase, following the narrating voice's rhythm and becoming obsessively compulsive. For instance, when Orraca Tetteh refers either to the birth of man, language or culture the frames on the desktop immediately multiply: the result is a pressing visual montage that keeps each framed image on the desktop only for a flesh of time. The naked bodies of men and women appear alongside

---

3 Camille Henrot, *Grosse Fatigue*, script available at https://dailyartfair.com/events/download_press_release/2525.

votive images of unidentified cultures; live and stuffed animals are respectively superimposed on photographs of their natural environments or on the deposits in which they are neatly kept **[fig. 2]**; scientists are shown at work next to research books and pictures of their authors (e.g. Robert Oppenheimer, for the field of physics, or Charles Darwin, for that of biology).

When, towards the end of the video, the narrator's voice mentions the discoveries of humanity in every disciplinary field,[4] the pop-up screens visualise and frame images which illustrate human achievements. These images frenetically superimpose on each other and get progressively smaller in dimension forming a pattern of concentric rectangles **[fig. 3]**. At that very moment the audiovisual 'chaos' reaches its peak. Keeping track of the ways in which the images alternate becomes almost impossible and, in perfect coherence with the objectives of the work, the viewer definitively experiences

---

4   This is the passage: "And mankind discovered the knowledge of history and nature/ of minerals, vegetables, animals and elements, / the knowledge of logic and the art of thinking, / the sciences of gratification and those of utility, / the art of remembering and pure mathematics, / the science of physics, the science of medicine, / the science of botany, the science of chemistry, / the knowledge of politics, the knowledge of alphabets, / the knowledge of magic and the science of God, / the knowledge of virtue and the mechanics of poetry / the science of laws and the science of commerce, / the metaphysics of bodies and the transcendental geometry, / the dynamics, the hydraulics, the optics, the dioptrics, / the acoustics and grammar, music, cosmology, geography, / orthography, chronology, zoology, physiology, pathology, astrology, aerology and more. / Then there was promiscuity and monogamy and polygyny and polyandry and polygynandry. / Then Mayshe and Mashyane fulfilled their desire. / The whole earth was heavy and then Yahweh rested".
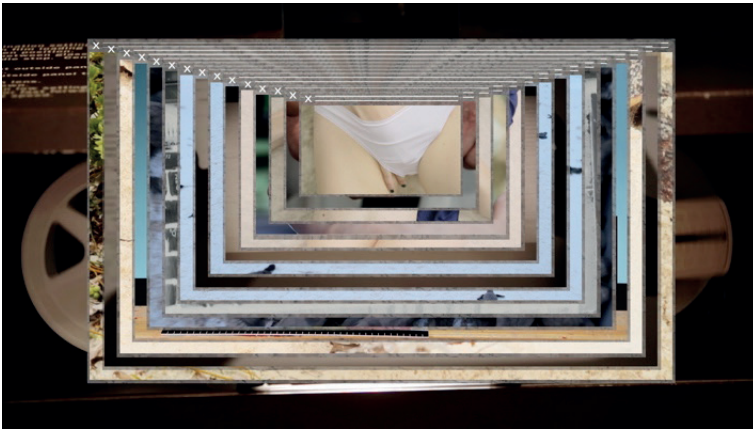
the sense of 'effort' suggested by the title. It is the 'grosse fatigue' of trying to grasp the Universe and its components, which inevitably results in failure.

2 The Frames Within the Frame

Even without going into detail of the (visual) narrative sequences at the basis of the work – a summary would be rather impossible – it seems pretty clear that the stratification of contents conveyed by *Grosse Fatigue* is the result of a well-studied compositional organisation in which the frame is both a structural element and an organiser, for several reasons.

On a first level of analysis, as it happens for almost every work of art, Henrot's piece is 'framed', since it has a limit that separates the space of representation from that of reality. The frame of a video work takes on different shapes and scales depending on the support or screen on which it is presented. Most often, the edge of a mobile device, on which the viewer enjoys the work on its own,[5] or the margins of the projection screen, if the work is presented in an exhibition

---

[5] It does not seem trivial to underline that if the mobile device were a computer, the space of use would coincide with that of fiction given the graphic interface simulated by the work. Such a way of using *Grosse Fatigue* was tested in the pandemic period, when, from 1 to 31 July 2020, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York presented the palimpsest *Virtual Views: Video Lives*, curated by Stuart Comer. On this occasion, six video masterpieces from the collection by Camille Henrot, Joan Jonas, Letícia Parente, Mako Idemitsu, Sadie Benning, Petra Cortright and Marine Syms were presented in free streaming, allowing anyone to watch the work according to their own pace, especially on the devices at their disposal – tablet, smartphone, computer, television screen, etc.

space or in a cinema hall. In both cases, this frame has a very specific function, namely, the ability to direct the viewer's gaze by delimiting, decontextualising, and legitimising the space of contemplation (Cf. Somaini 2000; Spinicci 2000; Pinotti 2018; 2021). It means an act of "delimitazione che è al tempo stesso chiusura verso l'esterno e apertura alla fruizione"[6] (Somaini 2000, n.p.). As Jacques Derrida put it recalling Kant, this type of frame works like a *parergon*: "an outside which is called inside the inside to constitute it as inside" (Derrida 1979, 26). Needless to say, in *Grosse Fatigue*, this frame mediates the transition from the real environment (the physical space in which the work can be experienced) to a world which is by definition 'virtual'. By crossing this threshold with their gaze, viewers start a unique immersive experience, and they do it consciously as daily consumers of digital technology via the screens of their computers and mobile devices.

On a second level of analysis, which could be called 'compositional', being exclusively referable to the space of the work, Henrot's audiovisual work is characterised by a complex flow of frames that appear on screen delimiting the individual images or video excerpts. The graphics follow that of computerised interfaces: rectangles of variable sizes and with a translucent grey border that bear on the top left corner the 'x' sign with which to close the open window. It is almost like a game of Chinese boxes that resembles the *mise en abyme* theorised by André Gide (1893) and Louis Marin (1988); or – as defined by Andrea Pinotti – "una caduta negli abissi"[7] (2018, 63-4), in which the largest frame of *Grosse Fatigue* contains hundreds of other frames with changing images.[8]

The frames behave as auxiliary structures, as "non-mimetic elements of the image-sign" (Schapiro 1969, 9), which give form to the apparatus that mediates the visual and narrative component of the work. They can be considered as tools which direct the observer's attention to the content: "focalizzano l'attenzione dello spettatore

---

The same ones that, as the project curator also underlined, have allowed humanity to project fragmented bodies outside the frame. Cf. `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qAx28A9q1E&t=44s`.

6 'Delimitation which is at the same time closure toward the outside and openness to use' (Author's translation),

7 'A fall into the abyss' (Author's translation).

8 The term *mise en abyme* refers to a visual (or narratological) expedient that involves the multiplication of an image within itself. Think of the famous *Self-Portrait* (c. 1646) by Johannes Gumpp, in which, thanks to an ingenious game of mirrors, the painter's image is duplicated in the space of representation. In the case of *Grosse Fatigue*, obviously, this approach is limited to the element of the frame since the content of each one is different every time. However, the vertigo effect appears to be the same.

sul quadro nel quadro (l'immagine incastonata, il dipinto di secondo livello)"[9] (Pinotti 2018, 58).

In addition to delimiting the space of the icons from that of the desktop, the individual frames delimit the moment reserved for the viewer to make verbovisual connections, they serve as an illustrative compendium of Orraca Tetteh's *spoken words*. Just to give a couple of examples: the window/frame showing some marbles thrown chaotically on a table appears exactly at the moment in which the narrative voice speaks "in the beginning there was an explosion", or when the voice proclaims "and the King above the Sky said, 'Punch holes in the Earth, the water will drain away'", a well-framed image of a hand squeezing a sponge over a basin appears on the screen.

Even when we are not dealing with such literal verbovisual associations, the frame is the space for imagination, "uno strumento per sottolineare e rendere visibile la grammatica degli oggetti immaginativi"[10] (Spinicci 2000, n.p.).

Following this first consideration, it is clear that the frame isolates each image from the rest of the composition, turning it in a single 'object': "si assume il compito di contrassegnare l'autonomia di significato degli oggetti immaginativi [che ospita], la loro pretesa di un senso compiuto che si radica nella loro acontestualità"[11] (Spinicci 2000, n.p.). An issue that is reinforced by the fact that each image that appears well framed in *Grosse Fatigue* is a material endowed with a distinct spatiality and temporality from those of the other portions with which it interacts. As in other works by the artist, these images are pre-existing and often refer to an "indiscriminate range of times and places". They are ready-mades, references, which offer a sense of idiosyncratic time (Katrib 2014, 53).

In *Grosse Fatigue*, however, the closure and delimitation operated by the frame are neither functional to protect the space-time autonomy of the image nor to suggest its withdrawal. On the contrary, to quote George Simmel, their role is to mediate "between the work of art and its milieu, separating and connecting" (Simmel 1994, 17). The windows in Henrot's work are then transitional elements between one image and another: thresholds that are fully part of the space of representation and, at the same time, infrastructures that separate and connect the visual fragments allowing the artist the dialogic montage between the concepts evoked by the images.

---

9 'They focus the viewer's attention on the picture within the picture (the set image, the second painting level)' (Author's translation).

10 'A tool to underline and make visible the grammar of imaginative objects' (Author's translation).

11 'It assumes the task of marking the autonomy of meaning of the imaginative objects (that it houses), their claim to a complete meaning that is rooted in their acontextuality' (Author's translation).
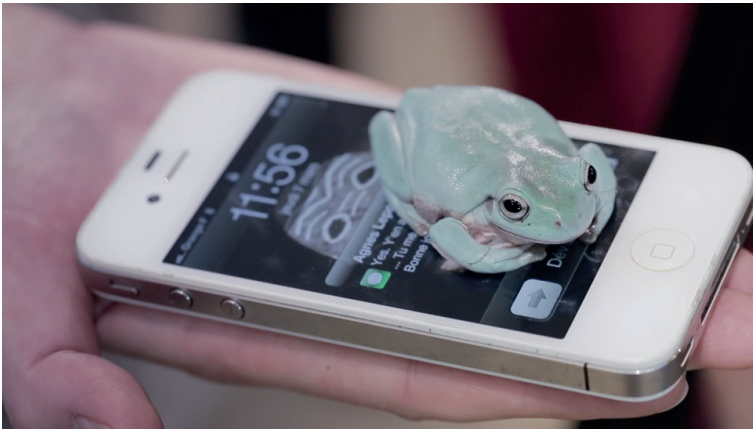
It is precisely the control of the ways in which the windows relate; their simultaneous appearance, their superimposition or the effects of analytical cut-ins and zoom-ins to which they are subjected (Kiss 2021) that allows the artist to deploy their reasoning and assure him an argumentative causality.

This last consideration on the dialogical nature of framed images takes on an even more important meaning considering that Henrot selects the images that appear on the desktop by following a classification approach. By tracing and combining the research methodologies used by anthropology or the biological sciences, the artist organises her visual materials based on their ability of bearing meaning to the narrative. And in doing so, she isolates each image precisely because, as the researcher Monique Jeudy-Ballini underlines in a conversation with Henrot herself, "no object would make sense without a frame" (Henrot, Jeudy-Ballini 2016, 185).

This act of classification/delimitation encourages both a moment of "differentiation, separation, and thus exclusion" (Henrot, Jeudy-Ballini 2016, 185) and an act of constant interpretation. Once again, it is the artist herself who claims that: "this over-systematization creates freedom, as categories can be understood together as a group or a structure that permits arbitrariness"[12] (Henrot, Jeudy-Ballini 2016, 185). Therefore, thanks to the frame dialogues, images progressively contribute to the narration on the evolution of the Universe and of

---

12   The artist refers to *The Pale Fox* (2015), an installation project that takes its cue from *Grosse Fatigue* and mimics its compositional rules, therefore, by extension, it does not seem risky to apply these words to its audiovisual work as well.

humanity but, at the same time, they open up to new and more specific narrative drifts appearing on the screen even for just a few seconds. The mix of images referable to both Western and non-Western cultures, for example, prompts a reflection on the colonial dynamics that permeate the ethno-anthropological museum culture. The use of Internet pages alongside images of original books and documents recalls the age-old conflict between the digital and the analogue, even at a cultural level. The coexistence of naked human (both male and female) and animal bodies requires a reflection on the idea of hybridity and post-human sexuality. The presence of natural images within digital interfaces prompt reflection on the relationship between nature and technology [fig. 4]. Each compositional aggregation produces a consequence on the narrative level, offering different interpretative germinations on the same narrative. And the associations seem to take on meaning precisely in the interstitial space of the frame.

3 A Hyper-Enactment

In order to understand how the very meaning of *Grosse Fatigue* depends on the way Henrot manages the frame, it now seems appropriate to delve into that capacity (only briefly mentioned) that windows have to turn the image into a single 'object'. And to do so, it seems pertinent to resort to the rules of so-called Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO): one of the most radical contemporary philosophical currents. It claims that any portion of reality – therefore also the work of art – would behave like a well-delimited entity which, regardless of its human, non-human, technological or imaginary nature, is defined as 'object'. These entities would relate to each other in a peculiar way each time creating compounds that inherit the spatio-temporal characteristics encapsulated in the objects they are composed of, and, at the same time differ from them for the creation of new qualities generated by their assembly.

Just as suggested by OOO, it seems that Henrot uses images as single entities which are well-delimited by what Andrea Pinotti has defined as "dispositivo insularizzante"[13] (2018, 53). They appear as portions of a lexicon used to construct a very stratified space-time narration.

Given the formal rhymes that *Grosse Fatigue* establishes with computerised technology, it seems important to highlight that American philosopher Graham Harman, the founder of OOO, describes the mechanics of aggregation between objects by referring to the

---

13 'An insulating device' (Author's translation).

functioning of object-oriented computer programs.[14] In fact, they do not use written codes "each time from scratch", but instead use "objects already written elsewhere for different purposes, [...] repurposing them in various combinations to create new uses and meanings" (Harman 2017, 11). Every image-object of *Grosse Fatigue* is the trace of a specific pre-existing experience (whether a document from the Smithsonian archive or created from scratch by the artist) and contributes to the construction of a new narration when juxtaposed with the others. Every time the windows open on the desktop and are visible all at once – or every time the images multiply following Henrot's dizzying montage – the work appears as an ever temporally and spatially complex palimpsest. It becomes what I propose here to call 'hyper-enactment' or 'hyper-composition': a *mise-en-scène* in which (as in a re-enactment) pre-existing objects migrated from other contexts appear (Baldacci, Nicasto, Sforzini 2022; Baldacci, Franco 2022). However, it is also a configuration where (unlike in a re-enactment) references follow such a convulsive order of apparition that it is almost impossible to reconstruct the genealogies and trajectories to which they belong.

The adoption of the prefix 'hyper', which always indicates exuberance in quality or form, is not only motivated by the fact that it has often appeared in the information technology field to which Henrot's work could also be aesthetically associated.[15] Its use is rather inspired by the use of it by one of the first OOO supporters, the philosopher Timothy Morton, who describes his "hyperobjects" as entities widely distributed in time and space which, thanks to the union of portions of smaller objects have become so large ('hyper' in fact) that they are never perceivable in their physical totality or conceptual complexity (Morton 2013). Although the nomenclature coined by Morton describes entities such as global warming, the biosphere and other objects or phenomena very different and much larger than art installations, the object-oriented roots of his thought mean that the recognisable characteristics in these entities are found in smaller scale objects such as artistic ones. In *Grosse Fatigue*, for example, the space of the staging is given by the aggregation of material so heterogeneous and interconnected as to frustrate any possibility of exhaustive understanding of the composition.

---

14 These are computer programs from which the same ontological doctrine derives its name (Harman 2017, 11).

15 Think, for example, of the term "Hypermedia" with which information technology describes the interconnection between text, audio, graphics and video to create a collection of heterogeneous and non-linear information. Or HTML (HyperText Markup Language) pages which contain a series of words which, underlined and highlighted in blue, function as links to other pages building almost infinite sequences.

According to Henrot herself, who speaks cryptically of the question in *Elephant Child* "everything is within" (Meister et al. 2016). As if – as proof of the effectiveness of the prefix 'hyper' – *Grosse Fatigue* functioned as that entity which Julia Kristeva named "hypertext" in 1960 and which Ted Nelson adapted to the computer environment in 1965: a textual object that contains heterogeneous portions linked together thanks to a system of connections which, regardless of being more or less explicit open up to other times, spaces and meanings (Kristeva 1978, 121).

In fact, in the frame of the largest and most unitary work *Grosse Fatigue*, each image that appears well-delimited by the rectangles of the pop-up windows is in turn a set entity that encapsulates different themes and concepts – such as those already mentioned and related to ethno-anthropology, interspeciesism and the relationship between analogue and digital. From rectangle to rectangle, from window to window, each image-object finds itself sucked into a flow but, at the same time, allows the hyper-enactment to contain more rhizomatic conceptual and narrative insights.

4 An Immersive Mess

In conclusion: *Grosse Fatigue* brings together a series of pre-existing references either extrapolated from the archives of the Smithsonian Institution or created by Henrot herself. The visual materials appear well-delimited from a space-time point of view to the point of appearing each time as autonomous 'objects', simultaneously divided and united with each other thanks to the frames within which they appear. The latter are interstitial spaces: hybrid membranes that allow the spatio-temporal experience of each object to live in isolation and simultaneously participate in a larger composition. Given the characteristics of the video montage – uninterrupted and convulsive – the result of the union between the framed-images is a chaotic and convulsive staging which, defined here as 'hyper-enactment', due to its formal exuberance, tells the story of the evolution of the Universe and of all the entities that inhabit it.

Once again, as it was the case for the works described at the beginning, the formal treatment chosen by Henrot for her audiovisual project is not a whim. She combines the visual material on the basis of its ability to produce meaning and, with a few effective tricks, such as overlapping, collision, shifting between images, pressing times of appearance, she produces a coherent composition to represent how certain narratives are decidedly expansive and elusive in their entirety – both for the narrator and audience. What emerges from Henrot's approach, in fact, is that her/humanity's 'grosse fatigue' does not only coincide with the impossibility of approaching knowledge

along the history of the Universe. This is true for any observer who tries to juggle the rhythms that govern the evolution of the Universe, so as for anyone who wants to re-construct a plausible version of the history of things and encourage the exodus of its fragments in cross-temporal migrations.

These repercussions of conceptual disorientation, which are offered to the viewer, are once again due to the role assumed by the frame. The outermost frame mediated by Henrot is that of the work, which has the ability to indicate to the eye the place where it must rest in order to immerse itself in the representation and to understand its meaning. It becomes a trading zone that allows the crossing of the image, bringing the observer into a digital and virtual space.

This is a complex operation in itself, given the amount of attention required of the bystander. But in *Grosse Fatigue* it appears even more difficult if one considers that this frame includes an indefinite quantity of other framed images that appear in front of the viewer in a reduced amount of time. Faced with the convulsive appearing and disappearing of the frames, the gaze is sucked into the vortex of representation, fragmented, and finally disoriented by the *mise en abyme* effect. The spectators experience the sensation of being engulfed in the narration, they viscously feel themselves as objects among objects.

This operation becomes even more powerful since each frame surrounds an image that has its own spatio-temporal extraction given by its reference to archival material. While getting lost in the hyper-enactment, thus surrounded by objects that refer to different temporalities, the viewer is literally lost in the story. Here he/she experiences the consequences of the human being's greed for knowledge, the desire to rearrange historical facts and, thanks to Henrot's visual tricks, there is a final realisation that any attempt to understand the totality of things is to be considered constitutively partial: "everything makes sense, but nothing adds up" (Katrib 2014, 53).

The *whole*, as Henrot herself says: "is the multitude of hyper-personal points connected together" (Meister et al. 2016, 120). The frames of *Grosse Fatigue* remind us exactly how these perspectives are bounded, so that it is even easier to get lost among them.

Bibliography

Alemani, C; Henrot, C. (2012). "Relations de Traduction: Camille Henrot". *Mousse Magazine*, 35. `https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/camille-henrot-cecilia-alemani-2012/`.

Baldacci, C.; Nicastro, C.; Sforzini, A. (eds) (2022). *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*. Berlin: ICI Berlin Press. Cultural Inquiry 21. `https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-21`.

Baldacci, C.; Franco, S. (eds) (2022). *On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools*. Torino: Accademia University Press.

Derrida, J. (1979). "The parergon" [1978]. Transl. by C. Owens. *October,* 9, 3-41. `http://users.clas.ufl.edu/burt/poescrypts/JacquesDerridaTheParergon.pdf`.

Gioni, M. (2013). "Is Everything in My Mind?". Gioni M.; Bell N. (eds), *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico*: *Exhibition catalogue for the 55th Venice Biennale* (Venice, 29 May-24 November 2013). Venezia: La Biennale, 23-8.

Harman, G. (2017). *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. London: Penguin Books.

Henrot, C.; Jeudy-Ballini, M. (2016). "Conversation". Meister, C. et al. 2016, 182-9.

Henrot, C.; Vamvouklis, N. (2022). "Camille Henrot". *Fondazione Imago Mundi*, 10. `https://fondazioneimagomundi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CamilleHenrot.pdf`.

Katrib, R. (2014). "Camille Henrot". *Cura*, 18.

Kristeva, J. (1978). *Semeiotiké. Ricerche per una semanalisi*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

Kiss, M. (2021). "Desktop Documentary: From Artefact to Artist(ic) Emotions". *NECSUS Journal*, 10-11, 99-119. `https://necsus-ejms.org/desktop-documentary-from-artefact-to-artistic-emotions/`.

Marin, L. [1988]] (2018), "La cornice della rappresentazione e alcune sue figure". Trad. it. di M. Della Bernardina. Ferrari, D.; Pinotti A., (a cura di) *La cornice. Storie, teorie, testi*. Monza: Johan & Levi Editore, 139-53.

Meister, C. et al. (eds) 2016). *Camille Henrot: Elephant Child*. London; New York: Inventory Press; Koenig Books.

Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.

Ortega y Gasset, J. [1921] (1997). "Meditazioni sulla cornice". Mazzocut-Mis M. (a cura di), *I percorsi delle forme. I testi e le teorie*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori.

Pinotti, A. (2018). "La cornice come oggetto teorico". Ferrari, D.; Pinotti, A. (a cura di), *La cornice. Storie, teorie, testi*. Monza: Johan & Levi Editore, 51-67.

Pinotti, A. (2021). *Alla soglia dell'immagine. Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale*. Torino: Einaudi.

Scalabroni, L. (2008). "Forme e ruoli della cornice nella rappresentazione pittorica". *E/C. Rivista on line dell'Associazione Italiana di studi Semiotici*, 1-33. `http://www.ec-aiss.it/pdf_contributi/scalabroni_20_3_08.pdf`.

Schapiro, M. [1969] (2018). "Alcuni problemi di semiotica delle arti figurative: campo e veicolo nei segni-immagine". Trad. di G. Perini. Ferrari, D.; Pinotti, A. (a cura di), *La cornice. Storie, teorie, testi*. Monza: Johan & Levi Editore, 91-111.

Shapiro, M. [1969] (1973) "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs". *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 6(1), 9-19.

Simmel, G. [1902] (1994). "The Picture Frame: An Aesthetic Study". Transl. by M. Ritter. *Theory Culture Society*, 11, 11-17.

Somaini, A. (2000). "La cornice e il problema dei margini della rappresentazione". *Seminario di filosofia dell'immagine*. Milano: Università degli Studi di Milano. `http://www.lettere.unimi.it/Spazio_Filosofico/leparole/duemila/ascorn.htm`.

Spinicci, P. (2000). "La forma della cornice e le sue funzioni. Contributi per una fenomenologia dell'immagine". *Seminario di filosofia dell'immagine*. Milano: Università degli Studi di Milano. `http://www.lettere.unimi.it/Spazio_Filosofico/leparole/duemila/pscorn.htm`.

Valenti, C. (2018). "Che cos'è il desktop documentario", *Il Tascabile*. `https://www.iltascabile.com/linguaggi/desktop-documentario/`.

Wiley, C. (2013). "Camille Henrot". Gioni M.; Bell N. (eds), *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico*: *Exhibition catalogue for the 55th Venice Biennale* (Venice, 29 May-24 November 2013). Venezia: La Biennale, 395-6.

Differences Between Single and Sequential Pictorial Storytelling

Hannah Fasnacht
University of Basel, Switzerland

Abstract   What differentiates narration with sequential images from narration with single images? Pictorial narration can take different forms, depending on how many images are used to tell a story. This paper questions common usages of the notions single images and sequential images, in order to better understand the differences between them for visual narration. It highlights the specific potential of sequential images regarding storytelling and notes what kinds of inference a spectator needs to undertake to correctly understand such pictorial narratives. The aim is to gain a more thorough understanding of a specific kind of two-dimensional pictorial narration: narration with sequential images.

Keywords   Storytelling. Pictorial Storytelling. Single Images. Sequential Images. Narration.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Syntactic and Material Differentiators. – 3 Semantic and Content-based Differentiators. – 3.1 Differentiation Between Single, Sequential, and Serie. – 4 Potential Advantages of Sequential Pictorial Narration (Compared to Single). – 4.1 Gaps Can Be a Tool for Narration. – 4.2 Expansion Over Longer Time Frames. – 4.3 A Higher Degree of Specificity and Depth. – 4.4 Surprises and Changes in Expectations About the Plot. – 4.5 More Guidance. – 4.6 Narration that Happens in Different Places. – 4.7 Close-ups Make More Sense. – 4.8 Higher Degrees of Complexity. – 4.9 Potential for More Narrativity? – 5 Crucial Aspects for the Narrative Understanding of Sequential Images. – 5.1 Inference – Ability to Infer. – 5.2 Time and Perspective. – 5.3 Identification of Individuals Over Time (and Different Images). – 5.4 Image Inside an Image.

1 Introduction

Are there differences in pictorial storytelling, depending on whether it is pictorial narration with a single image or with sequential images? I will argue that many pictures which are currently understood as being single images are images that have either different scenes or could even be classified as different pictures in some cases. And many of them use the potential of sequential storytelling and apply it to single images.

There is an ongoing debate about whether single images can be narrative, especially in art history, but also in newer, more interdisciplinary texts (Kemp 1996; Nanay 2009; Speidel 2013; Fasnacht 2023). There is also a vast amount of literature focusing on sequential images, mostly in comics studies but also in studies on picture books, graphic novels, etc. (Groensteen, Beaty, Nguyen 2007; Grünewald, 2011; Postema 2013, 2014). But, to my knowledge, there are no texts that specifically address the differences between single and sequential pictorial narration and their respective advantages. I want to find out if there are such differences in pictorial narration, depending on whether one or several images are used. In this paper, I understand 'narrative images' as images that represent some narrative characteristics, like events, time, etc., which are not freely associated, but for which there are enough pictorial evidence such that one can argue about the representation of a certain story by pointing to elements in the image.

How do sequential narrative images differ in their storytelling capacity from single narrative images? What makes sequential pictorial narration special? I want to address these questions by, first, presenting different categories on how to count images, which is a necessary step to differentiate between single and sequential pictorial narration; second, addressing what makes sequential images unique; and third, highlighting what is needed from a spectator to correctly understand sequential narrative images.

A key problem is that 'single images' and 'sequential images' are categories which are used frequently, but often without systematization. To describe sequential images as many image carriers with a respective image content, and single images as one image carrier with a respective content does not always work, as I will show. The contribution of this paper therefore can be seen as twofold: by addressing the question of what makes sequential pictorial narration unique, a spotlight is put on the different possibilities to count images; and by using more finely structured categories of how to count images, a deeper understanding of sequential pictorial narration can be achieved. If the question of what exactly differentiates single and sequential pictorial storytelling is left open, a degree of

ambiguity and a lack of clarity in a general examination of pictorial narration remains.

The scope of this paper is limited insofar as I will not be looking at either the cultural history of the sequential image or medium-specific aspects that make pictures experienceable in the first place. For readers interested in these issues, research in visual semiotics and visual culture offer excellent starting points.

In addition, in this paper I will not be considering moving images – like films or movies – as a third category of pictures. This does not mean that questions regarding sequentiality are of no interest for moving pictures. On the contrary, moving images and especially movies offer interesting avenues of inquiry with regard to sequential images. I want to briefly mention five aspects here. First, a movie normally consists of different shots, which, similar to sequential pictures in comics, often present content from different points of view and from different proximities (e.g. landscape or portrait shots).[1] Second, even in cases where a movie consists of the same shot throughout, the image content can change, thereby producing some kind of sequentiality. People can walk into the frame, events can happen, people and things can move out of the frame, move closer to the camera or become smaller due to moving away. It is also possible for the camera to change position, thereby providing various content with different points of view, perspectives and proximities, just without the normally present editing cuts. An example that comes to mind is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948).[2] Third, there are also cases where the filmed content does not move at all. Then the camera position, the perspective, the proximity, and, mostly, the picture content do not change. An example that comes close to this is Andy Warhol's film *Empire*, which presents a shot of several hours in duration that shows the Empire State Building in New York.[3] The sequentiality of such examples is not as evident as the sequentiality of other, more conventional movies. These examples may therefore intuitively be closer to 'single pictures', just moving ones. Fourth, even such cases can have some sequentiality, if one decomposes the viewing experience into the individual frames of which moving pictures consist. Fifth, apart from these more medium-specific aspects, one could also look at the complex aspects of sequentiality in the filmed content: a gesture in

---

1 Complications of such standard cases of sequentiality are movies which make use of jump cuts, for example Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (1960).

2 Even though this movie consists of several cuts, most cuts are not visible for the viewer.

3 Some things change in the picture content (e.g. the sky changes color when it becomes dark).

the more complex unity of an action, for example.[4] The question of how movement is perceived and individuated and how this affects the (perceived) sequentiality does not just concern moving images; it is pertinent in non-moving ones too and indeed, in my view, this question is even more puzzling in non-moving images.

Much more could be said about moving pictures and sequentiality, and how moving and non-moving pictures relate and differ, but for the remainder of this paper I want to focus only on two-dimensional still images, an area of inquiry which is already sufficiently large for the scope of this article: 'two-dimensional' to exclude specific problems of image vehicle and content of sculptures and statues; 'still' to exclude specific problems of film. Even though I mention at certain points works on film as a contrasting example, my aim here is only to differentiate between single and sequential pictorial narration.

Wolfram Pichler and Ralph Ubl introduced helpful notions with which to differentiate various features of images, like image vehicle, image content (which consists of image space and image object), and image referent (Pichler, Ubl 2014, 2018). But the notion 'image vehicle' might profit from even further differentiation, especially when it comes to the question of pictorial narration and how to count or differentiate between different images. This is so because what we refer to as 'one image' can sometimes change between the image content, the image vehicle, and further categories.

A straightforward idea about how to count images would be by counting the different image carriers (like the different canvases, photographs, etc.). But this way of counting the images based on the amount of image carriers poses some problems and, in many cases, seems inaccurate. One could argue that some images can transcend image carriers; for instance, one could say that several image carriers, each with their own image content, should be understood in total as a single image that stretches over different carriers, as in the example in Figure 1. One could say that the photograph shows one image, split over two image carriers and two frames with their respective image content [fig. 1].

The same problem exists the other way around, too. There are cases in which an image has one frame but may depict a person at several stages in their life, or at different places living through different events, and in that sense it potentially represents many 'images', even though it is only one frame, one image carrier. While this in general would not matter too much when analyzing an image, it matters in the context of pictorial narration and when seeking to gain a deeper understanding of how pictorial narration works. A pictorial narrative can only be understood correctly if the spectator sees such an

---

4 I thank a reviewer for pointing this out.

Figure 1   Jean Jullien. https://www.pinterest.
co.uk/pin/675962225299745352/ © Jean Jullien

Figure 2   Detail of Quentin Blake's "The Clown"
Quentin Blake, detail of "Clown", 1998. https://www.
pinterest.co.uk/pin/545780048582120610/
© Quentin Blake

image as representing the same character at different points in time. Should one call these different representations image parts? Image-units? Or different images? Or do we need a different category altogether? I argue that it is beneficial to additionally distinguish between single and sequential images, regardless of whether they are using different image carriers or only one. So, taking into consideration Figure 2, I would argue that it is a single image, stretched over two image carriers with frames, each of which has an image content respectively. Yet, nevertheless, it could also make sense to say that there are two images that constitute a whole, or, that there is one image that is stretched over two material image carriers. And in Figure 3, one could either say that there are three images on one image carrier, or one image with different 'image parts', or one pictorial content that consists of three images [figs 2-3]. But every case is a form of sequential pictorial narration. If we follow along Ubl and Pichlers differentiation between image carrier and image content, it then seems that both image carriers and image contents can be composite: constituted by image parts that are themselves carriers or contents respectively. It then may be misleading to speak of 'image' tout court, without specifying further what we mean by it.

There are several possibilities when it comes to the criteria one uses to count images: the number of image carriers, the number of frames, the number of distinctive/complete image contents. Often different categories overlap, for example in classical paintings, like when talking about the paintings by Monet. Even when looking at the whole corpus

of sunflower paintings by van Gogh, which have some similarities content-wise, and one could arrange them next to each other in a series in an exhibition or in a book, each painting has its own distinctive image carrier, its specific (complete) image content and a 'frame' which more or less overlaps with the image carrier. These examples, where different categories overlap, are what one has generally in mind when talking about images. And if all examples were like this, we would not even need these distinctions to count the images. But there are examples where these three categories do not overlap and as such, to really understand how sequential pictorial narration differs from single pictorial narration, a more thorough analysis is crucial. Therefore, I will quickly look at each of these categories in turn.

2 Syntactic and Material Differentiators

Syntactic categories allow a counting of images independent of any pictorial content. A spectator need not be able to decipher the representational meaning of an image correctly to count the syntactic categories of 'image carrier' and 'frame'.[5]

An 'image carrier' is the canvas, paper, wood, etc., which makes it possible for colors to be arranged on it in such a way that it produces an image content. It is the material that provides the basis. An illustrative thought experiment might be the following: we enter a room and someone tells us that all the objects we can see are paintings. But we cannot see the front we can only see them from the back, and we cannot move around to look at what is depicted. We just see how many canvases there are. If someone now asks us how many images are in the room, our best guess might be to say that the number of images is equal to the number of canvases we can see. Now, one could alter the experiment to people having the possibility to walk around and see what is depicted. Let's say that there are examples where the 'whole pictorial content' is spread out over several canvases, and other examples in which there are comic-like image series on one canvas. Here people might differ in their answer as to how many images there are, how many frames, and how many image carriers respectively. And if there are examples where nothing is depicted, where it is just an empty canvas, it seems at least questionable to count it as an image, and even as an image carrier, if there is nothing that is to be carried yet. If there is no pictorial content, the

---

5 For the purpose of this paper, it is not useful to further differentiate between certain image parts like lines, foreground, background, etc., at least not as a general category. There may be examples where such a differentiation is useful, but not with regard to the differentiation of single and sequential pictorial narration.
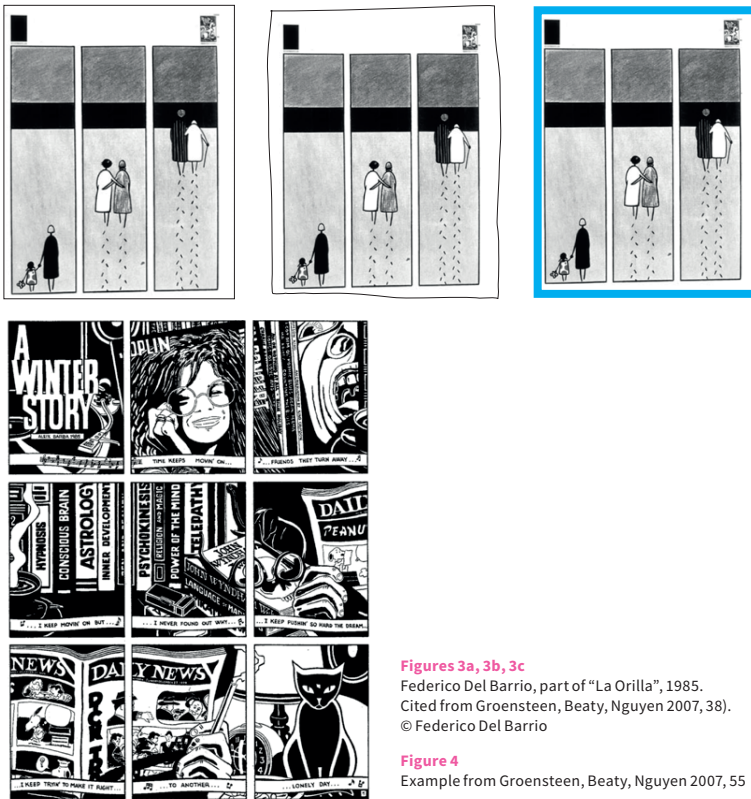
Figures 3a, 3b, 3c
Federico Del Barrio, part of "La Orilla", 1985.
Cited from Groensteen, Beaty, Nguyen 2007, 38).
© Federico Del Barrio

Figure 4
Example from Groensteen, Beaty, Nguyen 2007, 55

canvas probably cannot be counted as an image carrier. So, it is useful to have 'image carrier' as a category to distinguish images, but it cannot provide the relevant distinction in every case, especially not when it comes to pictorial narration. For the latter, a more fine-grained distinction is needed.

'Image frames' are another category with which to count images and to decide when an image is distinct from another. When frames overlap with the image carrier, the frame can be the end of the canvas and take the form of the outside shape. But the frame can be differentiated from the image carrier, as decades of comic studies have shown. In comics, the frame is often explicitly marked with black lines **[fig. 3a]**, where one might agree that there are three images (or five, if one wants to count the two small ones on the top as well). Someone might argue that there are three (or five) image carriers in Figure 3a, and that the frames and the content overlaps. But we could alter the example by drawing another frame around **[fig. 3b]**, or to a composition where the blue could be seen as the outline shape of the carrier or as a higher order frame **[fig. 3c]**.

Figure 5
Mirra Neiman,
`https://rb.gy/kav5n`
© Mirra Neiman

So, would it instead make sense to count images according to the frames, regardless of the image carrier, such that when they overlap, it is fine, and when they do not, the frames offer the relevant category? This might be a useful guide for examples like 3a. But there are other examples **[fig. 4]** that question whether the number of frames equals the number of images, could be of use as a general rule, as one might argue that it is one image that is split by nine frames. This example already shows that it is difficult to stay solely on the syntactical level when deciding where one image begins and ends. Consider also the case where two canvasses are put next to each other in a wooden frame. Sometimes, it might make sense to talk about one image then, sometimes not, and whether it does is decided most probably with the help of the image content.

3 Semantic and Content-Based Differentiators

On a semantic level, the image content can be individuated with the help of either 'image objects/characters', or 'image space'. Especially for pictorial narration, the semantic level is important to decide where one image stops, and a new image begins.

'Image spaces' are a useful category to distinguish images, especially in respect of narration: for example, in Figure 4, where there is one continuous image space that is spread out over several frames, or in Figure 2, where there are three distinct image spaces (even though the space might be more or less the same, just depicted three times, and therefore distinct). One way to decide where a space begins and another ends is to look for the continuity of lines or for empty spaces between places where something has been drawn.

Figure 6
Bredun Edwards,
https://rb.gy/kav5n
© Bredun Edwards

A further example to distinguish image spaces from each other might be with a photograph with superimposition. Image carrier and image frame might be overlapping **[fig. 5]**, and on this basis one could count it as one image. But because there is a superimposition, there are two image spaces, and one might argue that there are therefore two images.

A problem that arises is the standard of correctness. In another example **[fig. 6]** one might think it is a superimposition with two image spaces, but, as the person on the left is just visible in the reflection of the glass, it is arguably the same continuous image space, even though it is only represented as a reflection. However, one might also argue for the opposite, namely that the reflection represents another image space. The same considerations apply to the pictures on the wall of the diner. So, in counting images, we should distinguish between the top level (of the image in front of us) from lower levels (of the images it depicts, which could be several).

'Characters' and 'image objects' are another possibility to differentiate between images. When they are depicted twice, this might indicate that it makes sense to count each time they are depicted as one image.

In Figure 1 one can count two image carriers and two frames with their respective content.[6] So, one way to categorize the example is to say that it shows two images. But equally it could be justifiably classified as one image that is spread out over two frames and two image carriers. If one wants to argue for the latter, the individuation process is established through the image content. And it is not

---

6 Of course, there is also the photograph itself. But this should not concern us here in this example.
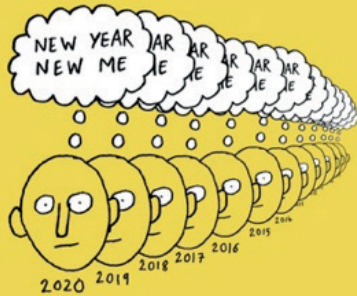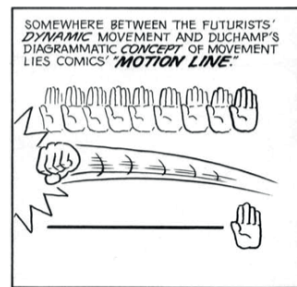
Figure 8
Scott McCloud. Example from McCloud 1994, 110

established through depicted image space; rather it is established through the characters depicted. Through the eye-contact between the orange and the green character, and because the orange body parts depicted in each frame can be read as belonging to the same individual. Size relations and other information, like the clouds depicted in the top frame, also support the reading that it is one character.

The individuation of characters can be important the other way around as well. If the same character is depicted three times on the same image carrier, it makes sense to say that there are three images (or image units or image scenes) visible (as in Figure 2).

So, a category might be to take the image objects as reference point for the decision of what counts as *one* image. To take the image object/character as the relevant category to individuate images might not always be of use. But it is of use, and I argue sometimes even necessary, to be able to understand pictorial narratives. Figure 7 only works when the character depicted is seen as the same character. Or it would probably also work when it should represent a different character each year, but then the message is slightly different.

But if one wants to distinguish images with the rule that one character can only be represented once, and whenever the same character is depicted anew it forms a new image and represents a new

moment in time, then one also introduces some problems. In our example **[fig. 7]**, should we really count 12 different images? This might not be the most intuitive way to count it. Another complicating matter is that in single images the movement of a character is often indicated, for example through lines **[fig. 8]**. Is the character then represented only once? I would argue that it is, as elements such as lines, fading, etc. indicate that the object is the same, just captured in a moment of movement. Nevertheless, it is not as clear a category as one might wish. To say that each time a character/object is depicted means that there needs to be a new image, because no one can be present in two places at the same time, poses a different problem. If this were such a fixed categorization, it would make it impossible to tell a fictional story of where the same people can be present in different places at the same time or have multiple bodies, all of which look the same. For these examples, the category 'image space' might be more useful.

When categorizing images with the help of objects/characters, the difficulty in determining where exactly one image stops and a new one begins arises anew. This can happen, for example, if there are colors fading out into a background where no important information is given. Here one might return to the image frame as a category or combine image frame with the content, with the focus on either recurring objects or recurring image spaces. But as the purpose of this paper is not to decide to which image each particle of paint should be counted, it is not of particular interest to draw an exact line around each image, but rather to decide how many images are present, how their presentation affects the story they are meant to transport, and how they are connected for the visual narration.

## 3.1 Differentiation Between Single, Sequential, and Series

So, there seems to be no general right way to count images. It depends on what one is interested in.[7] But there are better ways to count. And this depends on clear categories.

In this paper, I understand sequential images as images that have some narrative or other coherence between them; single images as images that are standing alone; and image series as images that might have some connecting element (even if this element is just that they are shown next to each other). Let's look at examples.

---

[7] The problem of how to count things is not unique to images. Most things can be counted in different ways (Noonan, Curtis 2018). "I propose that we take the fact that there is more than one way to count, as evidence that there is more than one true number of things that exist" (Baxter 1988, 200).

Row 1
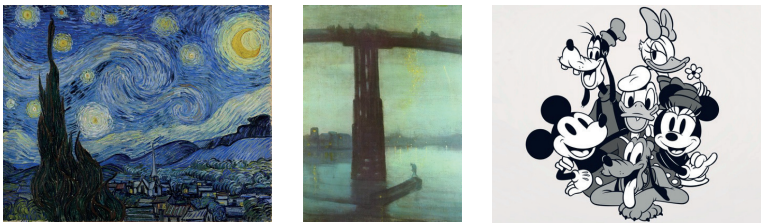
Row 2

Row 3

Row 4

Row 1 consists of three distinct images. The way they are presented here (next to each other, simply called "Row 1", "Row 2" etc.) and through their similarities (classical paintings, blueish colors), they might be called an image series, even though there was no intention by the respective artists to present them in this form and almost certainly no intention by the artists to make a connection between the respective image contents **[row 1]**.

When presented like this in Row 2, certain factors – like their blueish color – no longer serve to connect them. There are still three single images, presented in a row, which might lead one to call it a series, but it is at least more disputable **[row 2]**.

Row 3 presents sequential images. Each frame has its distinct image content. But these images are set in a certain order and have recurring elements. The ordering and the recurring elements can be seen as potential narrative elements **[row 3]**.

So, if several images next to each other together constitute a certain narrative – one that is not freely associated by a potential spectator, but has enough pictorial evidence in the image to be called narrative – like the representation of causally connected events – the combination of these images can be called sequential images. Sequential images also constitute an image series, which can be differentiated into single images. But an image series is not necessarily sequential. Sequential images have a connective element in their content that has some narrative element.

Row 4 shows a similar image object and image space three times. Even though they are distinct images, all refer to the same flowers and they are painted by the same artist. They represent a unifying subject (the same flower bouquet) and are presented next to each other, which invites a reading with a direction. But they show that all this cannot be a sufficient criterion to call the row of images that depict the same object in different images next to each other a sequential narrative. This row does not possess any narrative element in the way of representing narrative characteristics, like events that are causally or otherwise connected or the passing of time **[row 4]**.[8]

I differentiate between single and sequential images with regard to pictorial narration for the purpose of this paper as follows: when there is a character that is depicted twice, there is a strong indication that each depiction forms its own image, no matter how it is framed, or how many of them are on an image carrier. There is a strong indication that it is part of a sequential narration, no matter if it is on the same image carrier or not, or how it is framed.[9] If the image content

---

[8]   See Fasnacht 2023 for a detailed account of narrative characteristics in single images.

[9]   But with this I do not want to say that every image with the same character forms part of a sequence. Not every image of the Eiffel Tower that exists in the world

is in a way that the same objects are only represented once and it shows only one place, it is a single image, irrespective of whether it spreads over several image carriers or transcends certain frames. Perhaps a sequence of images is a collection of images that should be interpreted in the right order. So, in Figure 9, I would count nine different images for this use, and say that it is an example of sequential pictorial narration **[fig. 9]**.

The differentiation between single and sequential images therefore depends much more on the spectator and their correct reading than it would be with the differentiation with the help of image carriers, marks or frames, because it is crucial to ascertain whether or not the same character is depicted several times, for example, or whether there is such a break in the landscape that it cannot be happening at the same time and place, meaning that there are several depicted image spaces. So, sometimes more interpretation is needed

---

automatically forms a sequence with all other images of the Eiffel Tower. So, an additional criterion is needed: for example, that they are represented in a certain context, like a picture book. But even if they are represented next to each other in such a context, it does not make sense to always talk about them as being in a narrative sequence, as the example of Row 4 shows. One might say that an additional necessary criterion is that a narrator presented the different images next to each other with the intention of telling a story. Or a necessary criterion could be that the images represent some narrative characteristics, like the passing of time and events.

to correctly identify what kinds of images are sequential and single. But, nevertheless, it very often aligns and correlates with the basic understanding of frame and image mark, and to a marginal extent also the image carrier.

What is important for the narrative understanding is that the spectator can individuate the depicted characters, objects, and image spaces in a situation where it would make a difference for the plot if it were understood wrongly. Generally, it is less important whether a flower in the background of an image is identified as the same flower as in the image before. But if it is a very distinct flower, it can indicate whether it is the same image space. Whether a character is believed to be the same at another time or different at the same time or different at a different time is important to successfully understand pictorial narratives. Therefore, it is important for spectators to see sequential images as sequential images for the correct narrative understanding, no matter how they relate to the image carrier or frame. And regardless of whether one should call a pictorial narration as being told through sequential or single images, what is important is the correct individuation and identification of the things depicted.

4 Potential Advantages of Sequential Pictorial Narration (compared to Single)

Having acquired a rough idea of what sequential images are, we can now ask: what can sequential images do that single images cannot? There are some specialities and advantages of sequential pictorial narration. I want to shortly sketch each of them in the following.

4.1 Gaps Can Be a Tool for Narration

Frames and the gap in-between frames and images can themselves take on a narrative role. Things can happen in-between the depicted images: it may indicate a gap in time, a change of perspective,[10] or both. So, the gap is a tool for narration that is not present in single images (or, when it is present, it does not have a narrative function, as the image is spread out over different frames). In comic strips, it is often an actual gap (sometimes called 'gutter'). In picture books, it more often is the place where one image ends and the next begins, often indicated through page breaks, but not exclusively. So, if there are several images, the structure of these images with a gap in-between alone can be a narrative tool. But it needs to be used effectively. If there is

---

[10] I use 'perspective' in a spatial sense, not as temporal points-of-view.

no connection between the image content, it seems impossible to tell a story, even though an image series with several panels alone might indicate some narrative element. So, the gap between the images can be an enormously effective tool for narration, something single images lack, but a gap alone does not make an image series narrative.

4.2   Expansion Over Longer Time Frames

Sequential images allow a narration over longer time spans than single images can. While the time span that a single image can represent is limited, sequential images in general do not per se have a limit in terms of the time span they can tell a story about.[11]

4.3   A Higher Degree of Specificity and Depth

It is possible to specify more clearly certain elements of a story with several images. An object could be shown from different perspectives, adding elements in each image. There could be certain events explained more thoroughly, additional details could be shown, and a more detailed step-by-step narration is possible. A character can be depicted not just in one, but in several (emotional) states, giving them not only a more complex, but also a more specified representation of their personality, internal state, motivations, reaction to certain events, relationships, etc.

4.4   Surprises and Changes in Expectations About the Plot

Changes in the plot and expectations might be only possible in sequential images. It is at least easier to lead the spectator toward different expectations, and then surprise them, when something unexpected happens. With several images it is easier to indicate what happens when, and to represent different stages, and maybe also obstacles that could be overcome. Obstacles in single images are either shown as enormous, and through this maybe unachievable, or as so small that it is probable that they can be overcome. In single as in sequential images it is possible to provide a degree of uncertainty as to how a story will evolve. But only in sequential images can there

---

11   It is still up for debate, though, what is the maximum time span a single image can convey. Time lapse photography can be an example where there is naturally an element of time represented. Still there is a limit to the amount of time. What exactly this limit is, remains open here.

be a surprise and a change of expectations in respect of how a story will evolve. Given that such turnarounds and obstacles are often a crucial part of (suspenseful) narratives, sequential images have an advantage here. Single images can have an effect that is slightly similar, through captions, for example in cartoons, where the image shows something, and the caption puts it into a different light or pushes the reader to adapt their original expectation and reading of the image. But in wordless single images, it is quite hard if not impossible to disappoint the narrative expectation of spectators about how the plot will evolve. An explanation for the difference might be that surprise involves time. And while sequential images are present at the same time, they are taken in in a certain order. Single images can also be taken in over some time, but it is much harder to control how the image viewer processes the image.

4.5 More Guidance

Sequential images provide more guidance to potential spectators through the different aspects they should focus on step by step – for example, by showing different characters in their own frame after each other. There might still be some readjustment happening, like looking back at a previous image (see, for example, Cohn 2013, 2020, 2021), but in general the focus is more guided than in single pictorial narration. This guiding is brought to an even more extreme form in movies. In films, the filmmaker determines what comes after what and how long we are to look at each shot (leaving aside the possibility of stopping the movie, scrolling back in time, or otherwise manipulating the film, compared to how it would be perceived in a cinema). Yet, even in movies a spectator has the choice to focus on certain aspects of the image. Thus, not everything can be determined by the author/illustrator/filmmaker, but the amount of guidance has the potential to increase – and generally does so – from single, to sequential, to moving images.

4.6 Narration that Happens in Different Places

With sequential images, stories can be told that occur in different places: either after each other – such that character X could change its location throughout the story – or at the same time – whereby it is about several characters. So, character X is at place p and character Y is at place q, and this story is somehow connected.[12] In single images,

---

[12] Like in the wordless picture book *The Red Book* by B. Lehman (Clarion books, 2004).

it seems quite hard to depict a story that stretches over different distant places. One way to do this is to use thought bubbles with images or indicate different places by, for example, distorting proportions and having character X in the size of a country in country X and character Y in country Y in another part of the world, like in the image **[fig. 10]**. But here a loss of specificity of the place or a distortion of sizes can be the price to pay. (And depending on the example, one might even want to argue if it then still represents only a single image.)

4.7   Close-ups Make More Sense

A further difference between single and sequential pictorial narration is that in single images a close-up of a character with nothing else is not sufficient for it to be narrative. But, together with another image in sequential pictorial storytelling, close-ups can make sense. Not only can they be tolerated when enough other images from a series represent narrative characteristics, but they could add the crucial element that changes a pictorial narrative and moves it in a certain direction. A close-up of a face combined with another image can change the overall narrative, for example by adding an (unexpected) reaction to an event that happens in another image. Conversely, the other image influences how the close-up is interpreted, for example the emotional state the character is believed to be in.[13]

4.8   Higher Degrees of Complexity

As with the potential to provide more specificity, there is the potential for more complexity in sequential pictorial narration. Different unexpected events, focusing on different characters, side-stories, point-of-view from side/supporting characters, etc. – all this is easier when there are more images.

---

[13]   For studies into this direction with film montage, see Prince, Hensley 1992.

It is possible to tell a mini-story of a side character in a single image as well. But in sequential images, it is easier to disrupt the main narrative, for example, to tell the side story of a different character. Or to have several parallel stories happening, which might not even interact. In the latter case, the main story would not even have to be interrupted. This happens often in wordless picture books for children.[14] But complexity can perfectly well happen also in single pictures, see for example in paintings by Brueghel. In the *Flemish Proverbs* many things are happening; it is a complex image with a host of small narratives and lots of details. But it is not a story that has a complex continuous narrative.

4.9 Potential for More Narrativity?

The more images, the more narrativity? Not always. Narrative density could also decline. While there may be more possibilities to tell the same story with two or three images than with only one, it is not necessarily the case that more images provide also more narrativity or even more details.

The more narrativity, the more narrated time? Again, not necessarily. Three images that show the same moment from different perspectives can add to the narrativity, even though there is no amount of time added.

But what heightens the narrativity if 'sequentiality' alone is not doing so? I have noted elsewhere the following aspects that might heighten the levels of narrativity in single images: quantity of narrative characteristics, quality of narrative characteristics, interrelations between characters, suspense, conflict and complication, prominence and framing; it also depends on the individual judgment of a spectator (Fasnacht 2023). These aspects can be important in sequential images as well. Additionally, it might be a matter of the relationship of one image towards the whole. That is to say, is one image out of ten representing narrative characteristics (like events, passing of time, display of intentions, etc.), or are ten images out of ten representing narrative characteristics? The latter probably is higher in narrativity, not only because in total there are more narrative characteristics represented, but also because the ratio of how many images have some narrative elements is high. So, a single image that is fully packed with narrative characteristics and interrelations between

---

14 For example: *Where is the cake* by Thé Tjong-Khing (Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2007). Here, several different characters are experiencing several things. The main narrative element is the stealing of a cake and how it can be recovered. Yet there are other narrative elements going on. And these other elements invite a re-reading of the story, with a focus on different characters each time, for example.

characters and suspense is probably higher than an image series that represents the exact same amount of narrative characteristics overall, just spread out over ten images. But sequential images have an advantage over single images that by their structure alone a certain amount of narrativity or narrative expectation is provided. This makes sequential images potentially more narrative, even though this is not a given in every case.

When there are several images one can look at the relationship of one image to all the images. When there is narrative density, then almost all single images bring the story forward. When there are several images in a series that do not add anything specific or relevant to the story, not even some atmosphere, then the story gets more monotonous, even though there are more images than if it were told only through one. So, the expectation we have of images when we know they should tell a story is, maybe unconsciously, that more images should equal more information. And if an image series fails to do that, then the narrative expectation might be disappointed.[15]

So, sequential images have the potential to tell more complex and more specific stories that are higher in narrativity. But through this potential the expectations of the narrativity and complexity of sequential pictorial narration might rise as well. This could lead to the evaluation that a three-image panel is lower in narrativity than a single image, even though they might 'tell' the exact same thing, the panel just spreads it out over three frames. The frames alone, the sequentiality alone, can lead to a narrative expectation. This can help the illustrator, but it may in some cases also lead to a kind of disappointment in the evaluation of the amount of narrativity, as when the potentiality is not fully utilized.

5　Crucial Aspects for the Narrative Understanding of Sequential Images

A spectator needs to infer and draw conclusions in order to understand pictorial narratives. This is the case for single pictorial narration and sequential pictorial narration. I want to highlight here what is special in the understanding of sequential narrative images.

15　An example of this might be the picture book "Leaf" by Daishu Ma: it uses many images to tell a rather basic and short narrative. And the images do not add that much to the surrounding atmospherics either. This, overall, gives the impression that some pages were unnecessary to bring the story forward or that it is not really that high in narrativity. The relationship of one image to all the images is important in terms of deciding which ones are driving the narrativity forward, which images are just decoration, or a "pause", which add something, if not an event, but some other atmospheric elements.

Figures 11-12   Spread of *Inside Outside* by Anne-Margot Ramstein and Matthias Arégui.
© Anne-Margot Ramstein, Matthias Arégui

5.1   Inference – Ability to Infer

The spectator must be able to infer from visual cues what is happening and extract meaning. This is especially important in sequential images when there is a gap between the images that function as part of the narration, not through depiction or 'telling', but rather through leaving certain aspects out. This gap does not necessarily indicate that something has happened; it could also just indicate a change of perspective. So, for the correct understanding of a visual sequential narrative, the spectator needs to infer whether the gap indicates a change of perspective, a change of time or whether crucial events happened in-between. To draw the right conclusion, the spectator needs to look for recurrences to correctly identify (at least) three things: time, perspective, identification/reference.[16]

5.2   Time and Perspective

Two images can represent a succession in time or represent a change of perspective of the same moment.

Figure 11 shows a succession in time from a similar perspective while Figure 12 shows a change of perspective from a similar time. It could also be both. A change of perspective *and* a succession in time at the same time. Quite often this is the case, especially in picture books **[figs 11-12]**.

To understand whether the gap between two images indicates a change of perspective or a change in time can be crucial for the correct narrative understanding of sequential images. Two images or

---

16   The ability to infer is necessary in certain non-sequential pictures too, for example if a temporal sequence is represented by a single picture, then the image viewer needs to fill in the aspects that are not explicitly represented or depicted.
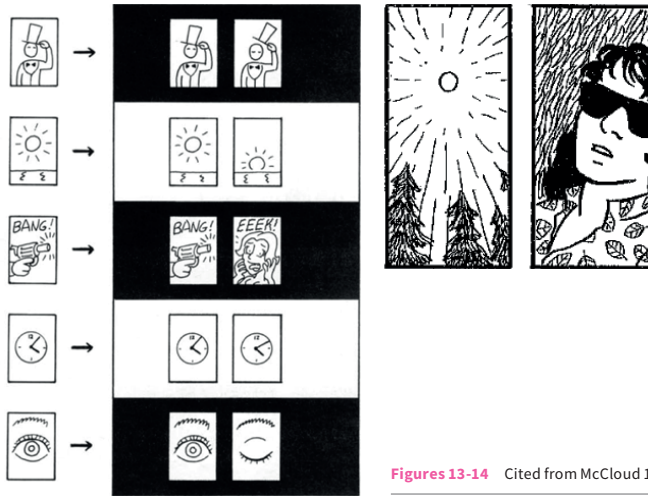
more can indicate that there is a temporal succession between the images. The gap could also indicate that it is just a change of perspective and that the scenes depicted in the respective images happen at the same time or have some 'temporal overlap'.[17] So, how to decide which is which? It helps to look for recurrences. Without any recurrence it is difficult to establish connections between images. Recurrence of characters, places, objects, motifs, etc. is important for narratives, especially in sequential pictorial narratives. This is obvious, but if there are more than one image, there seems to be some recurrence needed, or, if there is none, then this lack of recurrence might be part of the 'story'. For example, image one is somebody going into a lake. Image two is just the lake. If there are some bubbles in the second image, it is clearly connected. If there is only the water, one might speculate more as to whether the person sank, is diving, went out of the water and this is just a shot of a later time, etc.

The recurrence of the same image space or the same point-of-view on a depicted character/object indicates a succession in time, generally. See for example the top two rows and the bottom two rows in the Figure 13. But exactly how much time is questionable, as it could also be just additional images of the same scene to put the focus on it, to show a close-up of the face, etc. Then there might be a little bit of time happening between the images, but to a very low extent, and not in a manner that substantially propels the narrative forward.

If there is no recurrence, it might indicate a change of perspective, as in the third row of the example [fig. 13]. A change of perspective can

---

17   See also Abusch 2014.

Figure 15 Fiete Stolte, 2017, *Fade*. Aludibond. Exhibition "Transit". Albertz Benda NYC. © Fiete Stolte

be indicated through the depiction of two elements that can stand in a connection together, for example the shining sun and sunglasses in the related example [fig. 14]. Here, the two images indicate a change of perspective, and probably no change in time. Or if they (also) indicate a change in time, it is not that relevant. The sunglasses and the sun give a hint that the images belong together and establish a minimal connection between them. But there is no general rule as to what kinds of objects establish such a connection. For example, the fir trees on the left image and the leaves on the shirt on the right image do not establish a connection in a relevant way here. But it is possible that leaves and trees form such a connection in another example. When there is a change of perspective, some elements in the picture often indicate this. In Figure 12 the clothes of the workers establish a connection between the images which would perhaps otherwise need more imagination or association to establish.

5.3 Identification of Individuals Over Time (and Different Images)

For the recurrence of characters, they need to be identifiable as the same character. What processes are at play when we distinguish individuals? How do we do this? In images one can look for certain distinguishing characteristics, like looks, faces, clothes, etc. Or if it is an object, individual characteristics, specifics, anomalies of this object. Is there something that stands out from the masses, that makes a certain object or character special?[18]

There are examples where it is especially hard to individualize someone or something, especially if certain features like the face are not shown. If this process of checking for individualizing features

18 How to individuate and how to identify something as being identical with itself, for example over time, or parts to the whole, etc., has been the subject of extensive philosophical research (Noonan, Curtis 2018). While I am not aware of any texts in this area that pertain to images, it is certainly a relevant aspect of pictorial narration (and narration in general). Some background literature on the identity problem that could be useful for pictorial narration are (Baxter, 1988) on aspects of many-one identity, and a sketch of how to count (Geach 1973; Noonan 2015).

fails to come to a conclusion and remains ambiguous, a spectator cannot be sure whether it is the same character recurring or another one, whether it is a change of perspective on a different character or a succession in time with the same character.

In the example **[fig. 15]** it could be the same person, then they would be photographed at different moments. It could be different persons, then it could be a momentary image. But independently of how the image was made (photography, manipulation) or what message was intended (if there is one), there may be questions asked about how to individuate the person(s) in the image (no face makes it more difficult) and how to decide whether it represents a succession of time or one moment in time. This is especially difficult with stick figures that do not have any distinguishing features, such that it could represent five different persons at the same time or one person at five different times. In some examples of ancient cave paintings, this problem seems to arise, as Figure 16 shows **[fig. 16]**.

In Figure 17 the spectator needs to infer that these are the same two persons at different stages in their life, and not six different individuals. Only through this correct identification can something like a 'narrative' evolve. Otherwise, it would just indicate a moment in time with six different people walking **[fig. 17]**.[19]

These are things with which an illustrator can play. To make it either ambiguous (perhaps more of a tendency in classical artworks)

---

19   Figure 17 is not a paradigmatic case of sequential pictorial narration, as it does not represent events, but rather represents the same unifying subjects over an extremely long time span at different stages in their life. And since one can make the metaphorical reference to life itself, this adds some elements of narrativity that would not be there if it were to represent three stages of someone preparing an espresso machine, putting it on the cooker, and drinking the espresso.

Figure 18
Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434.
Oil on oak, 82,2 × 60 cm. National Gallery, London

or clear (maybe of more interest for picture book illustrators). There are exceptions, of course, and I am not even committed to saying that are the tendencies.

5.4   Image Inside an Image

As a last point: what about the examples **[figs. 18-21]** of images inside an image? These can arguably be single images. But by having an image inside an image, each of which stand in a relation to the other, they use the possibilities of sequential narration. This gives single images the possibilities to refer to different places and perspectives, different time frames, and different versions of a character (for example, younger, in a relationship with someone else, etc.). All three aspects would normally only be possible in sequential pictorial narration. One might even say that these kinds of 'image inside and image'-examples allow the potential for more complex and detailed stories and high levels of narrativity. And they demand from a spectator the same levels of correct identification of the same characters, of whether the image inside the image is a change of perspective and no change in time (as, for example, a TV or Zoom meeting would indicate), or whether it represents a change in time (as an old photograph on the wall would indicate). Even close-ups can make sense as one of the two images. In conclusion, one might think that the potential and the specificities of sequential pictorial narration can also be, at least to a certain extent, found in single pictorial narration – at least if one would wishes to count examples that represent images inside other images that stand in a narrative relation to each other as single images.

Figure 19   Detail of Barbara Lehmann's *The Red Book*. © Barbara Lehmann
Figure 20   Detail of Gabrielle Vincent's *Ernest & Celestine's Patchwork Quilt*, 1982. © Gabrielle Vincent
Figure 21   Detail of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*. © Shaun Tan

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to address the differences in pictorial narration depending on whether single or sequential images are used. The paper established different categories with which to differentiate between and count images: on a syntactical level, the image carrier and the image frame; on a semantic level, by distinguishing (recurring) image spaces or depicted objects/characters. For sequential pictorial narration, the semantic categories prove to be especially useful. These different images or image scenes – which can be classified either through image spaces or the recurrence of characters, for example – stand in a sequential relation to each other. This means that there are at least two images or image scenes that together evoke a narrative. And this relation needs to be deciphered correctly by a potential spectator to evoke a specific meaning. While inference and interpretation are needed to understand narrative single images as well, there are certain aspects that are especially or only relevant in sequential pictorial narration (and probably moving images as well): the correct identification of objects, characters, and image spaces and the correct inference of what happens in-between the depicted scenes and images. Some of the advantages of sequential pictorial narration over narration with a single picture include the potential to tell stories with longer time spans, more details, surprises, and plot twists, and greater complexity and narrativity.

So, when to use what kinds of images to convey something? When a detailed narrative is needed: more images. When it is complex and different steps need to be understood to follow the story: more images. If it is a metaphorical, ambiguous, or poetic 'story': both single and sequential images are good.[20]

Bibliography

Abusch, D. (2014) 'Temporal Succession and Aspectual Type in Visual Narrative". U. Sauerland; L. Crnič (eds), *The Art and Craft of Semantics. A Festschrift for Irene Heim*. Cambridge: MIT Working Papers in Linguistics.

Baxter, D.L.M. (1988). "Many-One Identity". *Philosophical Papers*, 17(3), 193-216 `https://doi.org/10.1080/05568648809506300`.

Cohn, N. (2013). "Visual Narrative Structure". *Cognitive Science*, 37(3), 413-52. `https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12016`.

Cohn, N. (2020). "Your Brain on Comics: A Cognitive Model of Visual Narrative Comprehension". *Topics in Cognitive Science.* [Preprint]. `https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/tops.12421`.

Cohn, N. (2021). "A starring role for inference in the neurocognition of visual narratives", *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 6(1). `https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-021-00270-9`.

Fasnacht, H. (2023). "The Narrative Characteristics of Images". *British Journal of Aesthetics* 63(1), 1–23. `https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayac033`.

Geach, P.T. (1973) "Ontological Relativity and Relative Identity". Munitz, M.K. (ed.), *Logic and Ontology*. New York: New York University Press.

Groensteen, T.; Beaty, B.; Nguyen, N. (2007). *The System of Comics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Grünewald, D. (2011). "Bilder sprechen ohne Worte: Carl Meffert/Clément Moreau". *Deutsche Comicforschung*, 7, 64-76.

Kemp, W. (1996). *The Narrativity of the Frame. The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*. Cambridge. `http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/1931/`.

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: William Morrow.

Nanay, B. (2009). "Narrative Pictures". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 67(1), 119-29.

Noonan, H. and Curtis, B. (2018). "Identity". Zalta, E.N. (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Summer 2018. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. `https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/identity/`.

Noonan, H.W. (2015). "Relative Identity". *Philosophical Investigations*, 38(1-2), 52–71. `https://doi.org/10.1111/phin.12076`.

Pichler, W. (2018). "Vehikel, Inhalt, Referent: Grundbegriffe einer Bildtheorie". Seitz, S.; Graneß, A.; Stenger, G. (eds), *Facetten gegenwärtiger Bildtheorie: Interkulturelle und interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien (Reihe Interkulturelle Philosophie), 39-54. `https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-22827-9_3`.

Pichler, W.; Ubl, R. (2014). *Bildtheorie zur Einführung*. Junius. `https://katalog.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/cgi-bin/titel.cgi?katkey=67695164`.

Pichler, W.; Ubl, R. (2018). "Images Without Objects and Referents? A Reply to Étienne Jollet's Review of our Bildtheorie zur Einführung (Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte 79, 2016, 435-9)". *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* [Preprint], 81. Band.

Postema, B. (2013). *Narrative Structure in Comics. Making Sense of Fragments*. Rochester: RIT Press.

Postema, B. (2014). "Following the Pictures: Wordless Comics for Children". [Preprint]. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 5(3). `https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21504857.2014.943541`.

Prince, S.; Hensley, W.E. (1992). "The Kuleshov Effect: Recreating the Classic Experiment". *Cinema Journal*. 31(2), 59-75. https://doi.org/10.2307/1225144.

Schapiro, M. (1972). "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs". *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 6(1), 9-19. https://doi.org/10.2307/3780400.

Speidel, K. (2013). "Can a Single Still Picture Tell a Story? Definitions of Narrative and the Alleged Problem of Time with Single Still Pictures". *DIEGESIS*, 2(1), 173-94.

Framing the Unframed: *Avalanche*, an Art Magazine

Tancredi Gusman
Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata, Italy

Abstract   Between the 1960s and 1970s, art practices such as performance, conceptual, and land art challenged the very possibility of framing the artwork and clearly demarcating the boundaries that enclosed it. In this context, art and artists' magazines assumed a pivotal role as they became the medium and site for the presentation and dissemination of these new art forms. This essay examines *Avalanche*, a magazine published between 1970 and 1976 in New York, and analyses how this periodical framed new art within its paper boundaries while at the same time expanding this art in time and space and showing the processual nature of the framing processes.

Keywords   Art magazines. Artists' magazines. Framing in art. Avalanche magazine. Art of the 1960s and 1970s. Contemporary art.

Experiments in visual arts between the 1960s and 1970s challenge traditional modes and models of art production and reception.[1] The idea of an artwork as an individual object, as a 'thing' with clearly defined borders, is called into question. Through multiple strategies, artists shift the focus from the end product to the production process. The work of art is de-materialized and as a result may become a concept or an action that highlights the relationship between the artist, the work, and the audience. These shifts impact the very possibility of 'framing' the artistic work, making it difficult to define the boundaries that enclose it and create the conditions for its specific experience. Traditional reflections on the 'frame' typically emphasise its isolating effect and ability to distinguish the work as a self-enclosed whole from what surrounds it (cf. Simmel 1994, 11-12). In its position as a margin, the frame "defines what is framed as a meaningful world, as opposed to the outside the frame, which is simply the world experienced" (Stoichita 2015, 67). The act of framing is, in this sense, deeply intertwined with the production of a representation: the framed object ceases to be considered part of the world in which the viewers live and becomes an object of contemplation (cf. Marin 2001, 356-7; Conte 2020, 12). The framing processes of an artwork therefore allow its aesthetic fruition. Nevertheless, as soon as an artistic work is no longer contained in, or reducible to, a clearly delimited material site, it becomes difficult to establish framing processes and to draw a line that separates the work's interior from the exterior world. The boundaries of the work become the object of negotiation and the work itself becomes an 'aggregate' of the many representations that can be produced through media such as photographs, videos, films, or artist's books, each of which articulates its content in its own way. The work expands through the processes of its own mediation and representation.

The process initiated by the avant-garde between the 1960s and 1970s not only concerns the limits of single works of art but also the contexts of their presentation, those institutional frameworks that determine the behaviour and perception of the viewers. Art moves beyond museums and galleries, and the boundaries between art and life, artist and spectator, natural environment and work of art, are transformed into thresholds where art research develops. With respect to their frames of reference, the observers undergo a process of disorientation. This is often seen as the necessary condition to trigger

---

the process of transformation of the reality which the new art sets as one of its goals. In 1971, conceptual artist Adrian Piper, while commenting on the series of pieces titled *Catalysis*, writes:

> Art contexts (galleries, performances) are becoming untenable for me. They are being overwhelmed and infiltrated by pieces of other disintegrating structures; political, social, economic. They preserve the illusion of an identifiable, isolable situation, much as discrete forms do, and thus a prestandardized set of responses. Because of their established functional identities, they prepare the viewer to be catalyzed, thus making actual catalysis impossible. (Piper 1971, 235)

Granted then that art research challenges the very possibility and opportunity to mark the limits of the work of art, granted that the very frames and contexts of the art field are disrupted, it is crucial to ask whether, and how, it is still possible to frame events, performances and concepts as artworks and to turn them into a representation meant for an audience.

The key role of magazines in this context cannot be overestimated. Faced with the changes that affect the artwork and the means of its distribution and reception, magazines, thanks to their distinctive qualities, provide the perfect response to the emerging needs. They make experimentation with new forms of art creation and presentation possible. They promote artists and alternative art spaces and allow artists and editors to reach a new audience without the intermediation of museums and art institutions. The growing importance of periodicals is part of a more general interest in the press and its seriality, which also affects the catalogue and the book, and is conveyed mainly, but not only, by conceptual art movements. Needless to say, magazines start playing a pivotal role in the field of visual arts well before the 1960s. Nevertheless, at this moment in time, they become, explicitly and with unprecedented force, the very place of construction of the artwork as well as the means for its dissemination and presentation (cf. Phillpot 1980, 52). In 1976, in an essay written on the occasion of the *International Conference on Art Periodicals* and of the exhibition *The Art Press* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London), John Walker identifies the major paradigm shifts occurring since the late sixties – including the downgrading of the physicality of the art object in favour of its conceptual component – as the driving force behind the enhanced importance of art periodicals (1976, 50). As Walker puts it:

> Towards the end of the decade there was a vogue for post-study and time-based work (Land art, Performance). The initial difficulty galleries experienced in assimilating such work, in obtaining

items for display and for sale, was soon overcome by promoting documentation of artistic behaviour to the status of fine art: a series of photographs of a landscape or an action was transformed into a 'photo-work'. Such material was ideally suited to reproduction and magazines such as *Avalanche*, *Flash Art* and *Interfunktionen* took full advantage of this fact. (Walker 1976, 50)

To an art that challenges the boundaries of the frame, magazines offer a new possibility of framing and thereby create the conditions for its aesthetic fruition. At the same time, the magazine frame is not meant to enclose, once and for all, conceptual and time-based art but to expand it in time and space, so proving to be an ideal medium for this kind of art. This essay examines in particular the magazine *Avalanche*, published in New York by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar between 1970 and 1976, and considers it as a significant example of the central function of magazines for the new art.

The array of periodicals that emerge or establish themselves in these decades is as wide and varied as their objectives. Alongside the major international art magazines, a network of art and artists' periodicals also emerges, often associated with local scenes but projected on a transnational discourse. These are meant to give space to art practices otherwise neglected by the mainstream art press, in that they typically follow contemporary developments from an avant-garde position. Among the many periodicals, we can find *Avalanche*, *Art-Rite*[2] and, later, *High Performance*[3] in the United States, *Art-Language*[4] in the United Kingdom, *ArTitudes* in France, *Data*[5] in Italy, *Dé-coll/age* and *Interfunktionen*[6] in Germany, and *Gorgona* in Yugoslavia. This group of periodicals linked to new artistic practices quickly builds an 'alternative' to the mainstream art press. In a short essay from 1978, Edit DeAk and Walter Robinson – co-founders of *Art-Rite* together with Joshua Cohn – venture into a provisional categorisation of 'alternative' periodicals and highlight some key features of this field:

> "Alternative" is used to describe a layer of the art world that is both nonprofit and in opposition to the commercial art institutions. Where the commercial structure attempts to consolidate and codify, the alternatives try to accommodate; they deal with the live nerve ending of turmoil —with what is on the verge of

---

2 See Allen 2011 (121-45)

3 On this magazine, see Sorkin 2003.

4 On the *Art & Language* collective, see Bailey 2016.

5 See Bordini 2007.

6 See Allen 2011 (201-25) and Mehring 2004.

formulation. Of course the alternatives are not really that radical (one does not often hear of a revolution with nonprofit status), but they do offer more choices to the aspiring fine artist. The alternatives are a means of survival and proliferation with a populist aura: they provide focus for communities, place control of culture in more hands, and question elitist notions of authority and certification. (DeAk, Robinson 1978, 38)

The 'alternative' periodicals are a space opportunity for the new, for what is not yet fully formed and formulated. They pluralise access to discourse on art and its processes of recognition and legitimation. Diversified strategies are chosen by each periodical to establish its footing in the public sphere of art. In addition, original experimentations are carried out with the many formal possibilities offered by the periodical. This is why DeAk and Robinson advise their readers: "Please remember that many contemporary art magazines do not fit well in any category, or fit well in more than one, and that members of a category are not necessarily similar" (1978, 38).

Avalanche's 13 issues provide a particularly interesting example of what 'alternative' magazines could contribute to the art of the time and, in particular, to the processes of its framing. By adopting *Artforum*'s square format, *Avalanche* makes clear its intention of challenging – while acknowledging its debt to – the predominant art magazines of the time, as already pointed out by Gwen Allen in her seminal book *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (2011, 101). While innovating the magazine medium, *Avalanche* collects and communicates the radical impulses of renewal that come from new art forms. As previously mentioned, these are the years of the de-materialisation of the art object, according to the definition given by Lucy Lippard (1997) in her groundbreaking publication from 1973. The experiences of conceptual art, performance art, and land art, question in different forms and ways the material, permanent, and transportable character of the artwork and its object/commodity features, while proclaiming the inadequacy of museum institutions. The notion of medium specificity as advocated by art critic Clement Greenberg (1993) is actively rejected by cross-genre art practices relying on the body, performance, photography, and video.

In this regard, the 'magazine' has a pivotal role: it no longer simply offers an informative supplement 'about' self-contained works of art, but it becomes the site of their exhibition and/or the vehicle of their representation. Conceptual art finds a medium in the magazine while performative and environmental practices find a means of documentation and presentation. In a context of radical transformation of art, the magazine also becomes a tool for catalysing the voices of movements, trends, and individual artists, contributing, as Allen (2011) shows, to the construction of an alternative artistic culture. It

is no coincidence that publications such as the previously mentioned German magazine *Interfunktionen* emerge to document the protest against the exclusion of the new art forms from Documenta 4 (cf. Allen 2011, 207-10).

It was in this historical setting that *Avalanche* was born. Firmly anchored in the New York art scene and its alternative spaces, it provides them with a significant platform.[7] Its origins date back to 1968 and the chance encounter between its two editors, Liza Béar, a translator and editor based in London, and the New Yorker Willoughby Sharp, an art historian, independent curator and supporter of the avant-garde. They met on the occasion of Béar's first visit to New York, when artist Graham Stevens had tasked her with retrieving a film of his from Sharp. The anecdote is told by Béar and Sharp themselves in the contribution *The Early History of Avalanche* (2005, 2). Despite relying over the years on the support of some collaborators and the work of artists and photographers, Sharp and Béar take charge of the magazine practically on their own, carrying out almost all the interviews and curating the publication in all its details. Although both the idea for the magazine and the first interview with artist Carl Andre take place in 1968, for economic and distribution reasons the magazine first appears two years later, in October 1970 (cf. Béar, Sharp 2005, 3). Joseph Beuys features on the cover of the first issue which is almost entirely devoted to land art. Printed on high-quality glossy paper, the first eight issues of *Avalanche* are in a 9 3/8 inch square format. Between 4,000 and 6,000 copies are printed, each issue coming out at irregular intervals. In 1974, due to increases in paper costs, *Avalanche* adopts a newspaper format, which will be maintained until the last issue is released in the summer of 1976 (cf. Béar, Sharp 2005, 3). The programmatic aims of the magazine are embedded in its name, as confirmed by Sharp in an interview given to Allen twenty-five years after the final publication:

> The word "avalanche" and what it signified was very appealing to me because obviously I saw myself as a renegade. I had hair that I could sit on, I started smoking marijuana in '64 and was still smoking at that time, and I wanted this thing, this magazine, to represent a cultural breakthrough, something that an avalanche does. It reconfigures, breaks down the old structure. (Sharp 2016, 65)

Just like an avalanche, the magazine aims to break the old structures and radically reshape the artistic landscape of the present. 'Framing' *Avalanche* in specific categories is complex. It is not an artist magazine in the true sense, nor is it comparable to mainstream art

---

7   See Allen (2011, 95); Ballmer (2011, 22); Béar, Sharp (2005, 10-12).

magazines because of its conception and profile. A possible classification of the periodical is provided by Sharp himself in response to a survey of contemporary art magazines conducted by *Studio International* in 1976. Asked about *Avalanche*'s target audience, he replied: "*Avalanche* is essentially an artist's art magazine" (Sharp 1976, 158). The prime position of the artist, here emphasised by Sharp, is descriptive not only of the audience but also of the contributors to the magazine. *Avalanche*, in fact, does not employ writers. The artists are invited to collaborate in the preparation of sections dedicated to them within the magazine and are interviewed by Béar and Sharp (cf. Sharp 1976, 158). *Avalanche's* defining and all-informing trait is precisely the decision to put the artist at the center of the editorial project and to participate in the struggle for their conquest of a prominent position in the art system – also when it comes to the processes of interpretation of the artist's works and the discussion of the aesthetic projects in which they are included.[8] The prime focus on artists is also clearly shown by the covers of the first six issues, which feature close-up portraits of Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Barry Le Va, Lawrence Weiner, Yvonne Rainer, and Vito Acconci. In addition to conveying a declaration of intent, such an iconic design makes the magazine instantly recognisable (cf. Miller 2010). The internal articulation of sections and contents reflects the key position of the artists, in particular in choosing to eliminate reviews and art criticism. Whereas critics typically hold the power to 'frame' artistic creations through categories and concepts, thereby setting the conditions for their interpretation, *Avalanche* proposes a full reversal; it entrusts the interpretative task to the artists themselves and disintermediates their relationship with the readers. As Sharp puts it: "*Avalanche* obviates art criticism; our first priority is enabling the artist to communicate directly to the *Avalanche* audience" (Sharp 1976, 158).

Each issue begins and ends with advertisements which are purposely not placed among the contributions to avoid any element of disturbance. The advertisements also bear witness to the twofold nature of *Avalanche*: deeply rooted in the New York context where it operates and yet simultaneously aimed at an international target. While the majority of the advertisements concern New York galleries, art spaces, and artistic enterprises, there are also advertisements for foreign galleries such as Attico (Rome, Italy), Rolf Ricke (Cologne, Germany), and Galerie Germain (Paris, France), and the events they organise. This shows not only the international scope of the magazine, but also that the artistic avant-garde that find space in *Avalanche* and in its advertisements is essentially a transnational phenomenon. Advertisements,

---

8 Concerning the programmatic goals of *Avalanche*, see Allen (2011, 100-03) and Ballmer (2011, 21-2).

along with revenue from grants, subscriptions, and sales, are the magazine's main source of income (cf. Sharp 1976, 158). However, these are not enough to cover expenses and prevent the shutting down of the magazine in 1976. In that year, Sharp quantifies the production cost of each issue at $6,000 (1976, 158).

Opening with a section titled "Rumbles" dedicated to news and the list of the latest publications, the contents of the magazine consist mainly of interviews – carried out almost entirely by Sharp and Béar – art document(s) and, to a lesser extent, (textual and photographic) artwork(s) made specifically for the format of the magazine. Articles and essays, such as Sharp's *Body Works*, which appeared in the first issue (1970), are rare. The magazine gives ample space to land art, body and performance art, conceptual art, and also music and dance – as evidenced by Yvonne Rainer's image on the cover of issue no. 5 in the summer of 1972. In short, *Avalanche* is not linked to a single, specific movement or trend, but instead stands as a platform where the different experiments of these years can find a space to meet, cross over, and reflect. Among the recurring names featured in the magazine's interviews, art pieces, and documents are Joseph Beuys, Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Serra, Terry Fox, William Wegman and Vito Acconci. Issue no. 6 in the fall of 1972 regarding Vito Acconci, is of particular interest as the focus is entirely on his work. For once, the magazine becomes the space for a fully-fledged 'solo' exhibition on paper.

Avalanche simultaneously serves as a magazine, exhibition space, and art medium. As suggested by Allen, in order to define the role of *Avalanche*, one should look at the several meanings of the notion of 'support'. She argues that the magazine is both a physical support and a medium for these new ephemeral and time-based art forms and, at the same time, functions as a support in their establishment in the public art sphere and art market (2011, 94). It is precisely in this capacity that the magazine offers a structuring to new art, framing it within well-defined boundaries, and facilitating its dissemination.

The 'interviews' conducted by Béar and Sharp are one of the most defining elements of the publication.[9] Their tone is informal, direct, sometimes intimate and ironic, recording a dialogue that maintains the characteristics of oral communication and does not exclude moments of diversion, breaks, or changes in rhythm. In the first four issues, while named in the interview title, the speakers are subsequently differentiated only by graphic differences in the fonts used: standard, italic, and bold. Priority is thereby not given to the authorship of individual statements but to the participatory and non-hierarchical character of a shared path of discussion. The search for adequate concepts to describe and capture new artistic practices thus

---

[9] See Allen (2005; 2011, 104-11) and Ballmer (2011, 22-3).

acquires a processual, performative and temporal character – as is much of the art discussed in the magazine's pages. An example of this is provided by Willoughby Sharp's interview with Lawrence Weiner, which appears in the fourth issue published in the spring of 1972:

> Then what are the general cultural precepts that you assume other people share?
> **The basis of cultural history until now.**
> Well, that's very vague.
> **No, it's not, it's very specific, meaning what has shaped your culture and mine.**
> There are very few people who accept a certain sentence as art.
> **"Very few people" doesn't mean anything.**
> You're assuming a lot. You assume that I agree with...
> **I haven't said that I assume that you agree or disagree. When you deal with a piece of mine, you come across it as a sentence. lt's just verbal.**
> lt could be.
> (Sharp 1972, 68; emphasis in the original).

The interviews have a documentary quality. They are the recordings of a temporal process. This makes their transcript something of a trace, as attested by the attention with which, in numerous cases, the dates, places, and modes in which they were carried out are indicated as well as by the fact that the interviewed artists participate in the editing process. It is precisely this 'document' quality that informs the relationship of the magazine with much of the art presented and published in its pages.

While accounting for the constitutive relationship between *Avalanche* and the art it documents, Allen refers, in the aforementioned volume, to the concept of 'non-site' by Robert Smithson (2011, 94-5). This refers to the specific dialectic that is produced in the artist's work by the process of removing material finds from one 'site' and relocating them to the place of their presentation, i.e. the museum or the gallery.[10] The notions of 'document', 'trace', and 'non-site',

---

[10] Allen, in particular, refers to an interview, *Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson*, published in the first issue of *Avalanche*, where Smithson explains the notion of 'non-site': "There's a central focus point which is the non-site; the site is the unfocussed fringe where your mind loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades, as it were. I like the idea of quite catastrophe taking place...The interesting thing about the site is that, unlike the non-site, it throws you out to the fringes. In other words, there's nothing to grasp onto except the cinders and there's no way of focusing on a particular place. One might even say that the place has absconded or been lost. This is a map that will take you somewhere, but when you get there you won't really know where you are. In a sense the non-site is the centre of the system, and the site itself is the fringe or the edge" (Smithson in *Avalanche*, 1, 1970, 67).

although different from each other and not interchangeable, all converge in indicating how the magazine functions as a framing device for the new art. The magazine's space, while not necessarily identical to the space of the work, nevertheless becomes key to its representation and exhibition. The works of land art, the performances, the pieces of body and conceptual art are framed, through images and texts, in the paper boundaries of the magazine and, having been distinguished from their surroundings, acquire a form which is then presented to the readers. *Avalanche* acts as an exhibition space that gives visibility and greater audience-reach to time-based art experiences, works made in places that are difficult to access, and performances that have only been witnessed by a very limited audience. Framing these works in the magazine's space allows the reader who glances through the pages to access them aesthetically. In line with its programmatic intents, the magazine thus contributes to the shift in the paradigms of art production and reception. Ephemeral, conceptual, and performative artworks are not framed as self-contained objects/works, of which the magazine provides mere depictions, but are articulated in a specific form – and frame – through their medial translation on paper.

The primary vehicle of these processes of representation and exhibition are photographs, along with artists' interviews, and texts. Leafing through *Avalanche* several strategies of representation can be identified, for instance the recurrent attempt to convey, through series of photos, the shift in the work of art from product to process. However, the magazine never chooses one single mode of representation of new art. Each contribution is conceived individually and depends entirely on the peculiarities of the artistic project to which it belongs.[11] The photographic medium can function as a simple document concerning the creation process; it can be a device for the presentation of the work or a place for its representation, as in land art. In this latter case, great care and attention are given to the choice of framing and camera angles. Photographs can also become an integral part of the artistic intention of the work, as can be seen in Vito Acconci's *Drifts* and *Conversions*, both published in issue 2 of winter 1971. An extract from the text of *Conversions* reads:

> Photograph as a move (an avowal made to the viewer: presentation of a course of action): photograph as offer (an advance, an invitation to the viewer): a performance can be the occasion for an activation of biography – the performer is anchored as the subject for biography. (Acconci 1971, 94)

As Béar and Sharp later write in describing their work: "Avalanche

---

11   On this point, see the other examples provided by Ballmer (2011, 24-5).

was a unique media phenomenon in an age that crossed borders freely, a cross between a magazine, an artist book and an exhibition space in print" (2005, 1). In this regard, based on a narrative made of actions, images, and texts, *Avalanche* participates in the process through which these works become historical-temporal objects or artworks. The art practices of which *Avalanche* is a document, medium, and exhibition space are not confined to a single place or time, even in the case of performance, but unfold in a transmedial space which includes their presentation within the magazine. In this process, within the specific relationship that occurs between the different media devices, the aesthetic experience and the role of the viewer/reader are opened to a continuous redetermination.

The intention to introduce a radical change in the art system and to deny its commodification turns out to be partially tamed by its capture within the 'framework' of the magazine. The unframing to which part of the new art aspires ultimately establishes a dialectical relationship with the framing practices that enable their representation and dissemination. The experiential immediacy of performance art becomes visible in the mediated space of its documentation; the site specificity of land art becomes accessible through its photographic representation; the de-materialisation of the artwork translates into new forms of materialisation and commercialisation. This dialectic explicitly indicates the field of tensions with which the avant-garde of this period is confronted, with the aim, on the one hand, of questioning the consolidated practices of art production, conservation, and exhibition, and with the need, on the other, of finding alternative forms of art presentation and communication. *Avalanche* responds to this need and opens up new possibilities. Within this framework, the struggle for the central position of the artist and the renewal of the medium of the magazine cannot be seen as two distinct elements. They are two parts of the intention to promote a paradigmatic change in the art field and to provide new forms of art reception.

In the course of subsequent developments, the art system and its institutions have proven capable of re-containing within their framework even the most critical and radical attempts of the artistic experiments of the 1960s and 1970s. In this regard, we can refer to the description of the paradoxical developments of conceptual art in the postface of Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*:

> Hopes that "conceptual art" would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively "progressive" approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded. It seemed in 1969 […] that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or much of it, for a xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an

ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded; it seemed that these artists would therefore be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market-orientation. Three years later, the major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by (and still more unexpected– showing in) the world's most prestigious galleries. (Lippard [1973] 1997, 263).

However, the process as described by Lippard does not only entail a restoration of the paradigms from which the new art tried to escape. Although the ability of this art to dissolve all boundaries has proved to be an illusion, these art experiments have managed to question traditional models of art creation and have opened art institutions to new media and materials. This has resulted in the redefinition of the function of the artist and art, its space, and its relationship with the beholder. The consequences of such a renewal can be seen today in the effort by large international museums to redefine their paradigms of collection, conservation, and exhibition in relation to ephemeral, time-based and live art practices. If the work no longer has an individual and undisputed material site, then the processes of its framing necessarily become plural, open to the intervention of different agents who negotiate its representation and reactivation, and unfold its potential meanings over time. The processes of framing the work of art, which are necessary to mark its boundaries and allow us to experience it, become temporal, open to revisions and new interpretations. They frame the artwork but at the same time expand it, showing the incomplete and temporal character of the framing process itself. *Avalanche* was seminal in launching this path of renewal, leaving an indelible mark on the history of the art of the 1970s and its subsequent reception.

Bibliography

Acconci, V. (1971). "Drifts and Conversions by Vito Acconci". *Avalanche*, 2, Winter, 91-5.

Allen, G. (2005). "Against Criticism: The Artist Interview in *Avalanche* Magazine, 1970-76". *Art Journal*, 64(3), 50-61.

Allen, G. (2011). *Artists' Magazines: an Alternative Space for Art*. Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Ballmer, A. (2011). "Avalanche Magazine: In the Words of the Artist". *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, 30(1), 21-6.

Bailey, R. (2016). *Art & Language International: Conceptual Art between Art Worlds*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Béar, L.; Sharp, W. [1996] (2005). *The Early History of Avalanche*, London: Chelsea Space.

Bordini, S. (2007). "La rivista come spazio espositivo: artisti e critici in 'DATA'". Cioffi R., Rovetta A., (a cura di), *Percorsi di critica: Un archivio per le riviste d'arte in Italia dell'Ottocento e del Novecento*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 501-8.

Conte, P. (2020). *Unframing Aesthetics*. Milano and Udine: Mimesis International.

DeAk, E.; Robinson, W. (1978). "Alternative Periodicals". Reak-Johnson, B. (ed.), *The New Artsspace*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 38-40.

"Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson" (1970). *Avalanche*, 1, 48-71.

Greenberg, C. [1960] (1993). "Modernist Painting". O'Brian, J. (ed.), *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, vol. 4, 85-93.

Lippard, L. R. [1973] (1997). *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Marin, L. (2001). "The Frame of Representation and Some of Its Figures". Marin, L., *On Representation*. Translated by C. Porter. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 352-72.

Mehring, C. (2004). "Continental Schrift: the Story of *Interfunktionen*". *Artforum International*, 42(9), 178-83.

Miller M. A., (2010). "The Business of Art: an Interview with Liza Béar". `https://www.nyfa.org/the-business-of-art-an-interview-with-liza-béar-73229298182`.

Piper, A. (1971). *section of an ongoing essay, January 1971*. Lippard 1997, 234-5.

Phillpot, C. (1980). "Art Magazines and Magazine Art". *Artforum International*, 18(6), 52-4.

Simmel, G. (1994). "The Picture Frame: An Aesthetic Study". *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11(1), 11–17.

Sharp, W. (1970). "Body Works". *Avalanche*, 1, 14-15.

Sharp, W. (1976). "[In response to a 'Survey of Contemporary Art Magazines']". *Studio International*, 193 (983), 157-8.

Sharp, W. (1972). "Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam". *Avalanche*, 4, 65-73.

Sharp, W. (2016 [2001]). "On Avalanche: In Conversation with Gwen Allen". Allen, G (ed.), *The Magazine*. London; Cambridge MA: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 64-6.

Sorkin, J. (2003). "Envisioning *High Performance*". *Art Journal*, 62(2), 36-51.

Stoichita, V.I. (2015). *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Metapainting*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers.

Walker, J. A. (1976). "Periodicals since 1945". Fawcett, T.; Phillpot, C. (eds), *The Art Press. Two centuries of Art Magazines*. London: The Art Book Company, 45-52.

The Image in a Vat?

Michele Di Monte
Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini, Italy

Abstract   The relationship between frames and works of art, or more generally between frames and images, is a classic problem of aesthetics and art history, which has however become a hot topic today, since new digital technologies seem to promise completely frameless virtual and fictional worlds. Nonetheless, it is perhaps useful to frame the question of the frame, and of the thresholds of the images, with a colder look, taking into account the cognitive, phenomenological and ontological implications of their variable and multilayered relationships.

Keywords   Frame. Image. Art Ontology. Picture Thresholds. Fictional Worlds. Virtual Reality.

Summary   1. Trespassing the border. – 2. Unframed illusions. – 3. Thresholds and frames. – 4. Framing frame. – 5. Really virtual.

1 Trespassing the Border

On 8 February 1638, in Rome, a comedy by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Flooding of the Tiber*, was staged, probably in Barberini Palace. The pièce, which dealt with a topical theme (alas, not only at the time), became famous above all for the invention of spectacular effects of theatrical illusionism, devised by the versatile artist. Precisely for this reason, the best thing to do here is to give the floor to an eye-witness of the time, who attended the show and who describes the most dramatic and for us most interesting moment of the staging in these words:

> As the curtain rose, an enchanting scene appeared with a view of Rome showing very distant buildings and in particular the Church of St. Peter, Castel Sant'Angelo, and other buildings well known to those who live in Rome. Closer one could see the river Tiber, which with artful movements and with unusual invention seemed to swell, for Bernini wanted to show those effects that had unfortunately occurred the previous year when the Tiber threatened to flood the city. Closer still to the stage, where the actors were performing, there was real water, contained by certain barriers that had been intentionally built along the whole stage; and real men ferried other people from one side to another, as if the river, having occupied the lower sections of the city, had impeded the normal business, as exactly happened the previous year. While everyone was amazed by such a spectacle, some officers inspected the bank, arranging beams and reinforcements, so that the river would not submerge the city. But suddenly the embankment collapsed, and the water pouring onto the stage rushed furiously towards the audience. The spectators sitting closer to the stage, really fearing being swept away, jumped up to run away. But just as the water was about to fall on them, a shelter was suddenly raised at the edge of the stage, and the water dispersed without harming anyone.[1]

Here is what today would be called a truly 'immersive' experience, which moreover risked turning into a less 'virtual' and much more literal experience than the spectators themselves would have liked. Inclusive effects of this kind were not so rare in the art of the Baroque

---

[1] The account is taken from a dispatch from the ambassador of the Duke of Modena in Rome, Massimiliano Montecuccoli, dated 13 February 1638, quoted in Fraschetti 1900, 263-4. A more concise and slightly different version can be read in the biography of Bernini written by his son, Domenico Bernini (2012, 133). For a commentary on the play and its historical context, see Fahrner, Kleb 1973, 6-8. On Bernini's theatrical work see also, more extensively, Tamburini 2012.

age, and indeed they were systematically pursued, not only in theatrical works, with the aim of stimulating the classic question in ever new ways: "what is image, what is reality?" – to quote the words of Rudolf Wittkower, who, commenting on Bernini's work, added that "the very borderline between the one and the other seems to be obliterated" (Wittkower 1958, 106).

As we know, the question is still fashionable, and many even think that today contemporary art and new technologies – we may even say modern *techne* – push us as never before to take the question very seriously. And yet, the case of Bernini's spectacle already raised a series of puzzling questions that touch on the relationship between images and reality, not only from an aesthetic point of view, but also from a psychological, or phenomenological, and ontological, or even metaphysical point of view. Needless to say, it is unlikely that Bernini's spectators, at the sight of the water overflowing from the stage, stopped to ask themselves: "is this an image?", especially if it were true that – as another version of the event relates – the beholders, "taking this simulation for a real flood, became so terrified that, believing an accident that which was in fact done artfully on purpose, rose in haste to escape; some climbed atop the benches in order to raise themselves above danger and in the general chaos trampled over everything between them" (Bernini 2012, 133). Nonetheless, the question remains relevant. And the answer is less obvious than it might seem.

In more analytical terms, on Bernini's stage there were two visual representations of the water of the river Tiber, one materially fake, made with paint, canvas, wood, or similar means, the other obtained with a body of real water present on the stage. However, both were visual representations. Even real water still represented the river Tiber, which therefore was present only by depiction, just as an ordinary man (even a professional boatman) could represent the fictional boatman in the world projected by Bernini's work. But what happens when the water overflows the banks and the scene? Does it lose its representational status and simply remain water, the real thing? Not really, although it may seem counterintuitive. Indeed, if it had been a real accident, not planned by the comedy script, the situation would have been different, the water that accidentally invades the room would then really be just water and nothing more. But the *coup de théâtre* contrived by Bernini was still within the fictional world of his comedy, and the water pouring onto the stage, despite its material identity, still possessed representational properties that it would not have had in the other case.

We could glimpse here a metaphysical identity problem somewhat similar to the much debated one of the so-called coincident or colocated objects, whereby one can ask, for a typical example, whether a statue and the lump of marble it is made of are a single object or

should be counted as two distinct objects.[2] But such a problem would lead us astray here. Rather, we must consider what role the frame plays in the 'immersive' effect devised by Bernini. And, again, from this point of view, the two cases we have compared have different implications. In the first counterfactual hypothesis of the truly unforeseen accident, the water, going beyond the edge of the conventionally recognized frame of the theatre, loses its representational and fictional status. Instead, in Bernini's most sophisticated staging, the river Tiber floods the stage, pretending to return to being simply yet menacingly water, but in fact extends the theatrical frame beyond the thresholds expected by the spectators. The frame, so to speak, 'swells' and 'overflows' like the (fictional) river, and in a certain sense it multiplies, because the *material* frame of the scene is trespassed thanks to a different and more dynamic *logical* (or phenomenological) frame, that, however unexpected, coincides with the implicit pact of fictionality that the artist establishes between the work and its beholders.

Derrida's well-known and oft-repeated questions, "where does the frame take place", "where does a parergon begin and end?" (Derrida 1987, 63, 57), are therefore less rhetorical than they might appear. But if the distinction between the work and its framing 'supplement' can be mobile or vague, this does not however mean that it must necessarily be arbitrary, as someone has suggested commenting on Derrida's text.[3]

2　Unframed Illusions

As we have seen in examining Bernini's *The Flooding of the Tiber*, the frame does not always behave according to the logic of the "milk cartons", as Gerald Mast shrewdly defined it (1984, 83),[4] and above all it is not always the material frame that sets the boundaries of the work, for sometimes the opposite happens. Certainly, Bernini's stagecraft can be considered an extreme case of hyperrealism and ingenious technology, at least for that time, but the illusionistic force of the work, even its ability to effectively cast doubt on the distinction between image and reality, between reality and fiction, does not

---

2　On this subject see, among many others, Thomasson 2007, 73-86; Fine 2008, 101-18; Sutton 2012, 703-30.

3　For example, according to Heikkilä 2021, 91.

4　Dealing with cinema, Mast argued that "the cinema frame is nothing like the frame of a photograph, a painting, or the theater's proscenium arch. These other frames operate analogously to milk cartons: what is inside the frame of a painting is the painting and what is outside it is not" (1984, 83).

necessarily depend on complex technology, nor even on a high degree of accurate pictorial or mimetic realism.[5]

If it is true that the three alleged key features to produce virtual reality experiences are immersion, presence, and interactivity (Mütterlein 2018, 1407-15), it is equally true that very elementary means are often sufficient to induce an effective confusion between reality and fiction. The phenomenological indiscernibility, in cases of fiction, is affected in the first place by the subjective and environmental perceptual conditions, which can require even very 'economic' deceptive strategies.

The history of military tactics and techniques amply demonstrates this, just to consider a field very distant from the Artworld and the entertainment industry, but in which the actual indiscernibility of the illusory boundary between reality and fiction (or more precisely deception) often has far more truly dramatic consequences.[6] And we did not have to wait for the twentyfirst century to find it out. The story is old, and many cases are famous. During the Gallic Wars, for example, it was enough for Caesar to rearrange and split up his troops (*apertis quibusdam cohortibus*) to make his enemy Vercingetorix believe that his entire legions were leaving, while two of these had instead remained hidden in order to cross then safely the river Allier (see Edwards 1917, 428-9).

But the best known and best documented episodes are those that date back to the Second World War, during which entire virtual or rather 'phantom' armies were created. Just think of the famous *Operation Fortitude*, which was intended to *simulate*, in the eyes of the enemy, the presence and position of massive Allied troops destined to land in France at the Pas de Calais, and at the same time to *dissimulate* the real presence of the real invasion army preparing to land in Normandy (Levine 2011, 175, 187, 200-1).[7] The complex operation also involved the construction and deployment of many dummy ships, aircrafts, and armored vehicles, some quite accurate and credible, from a 'pictorial' point of view, others much more roughly made, but obviously equally effective in certain conditions [fig. 1]. Indeed, in some cases, an excess of representational accuracy can even prove self-defeating. According to an oft-quoted story, during the Second World War the Germans built a fake airfield in Holland, made almost entirely of wood. However, its construction was so laborious and

---

5   For a recent and well-informed critical assessment about the controversial relationships between these different dimensions, see Conte 2020.

6   The bibliography on this topic is truly vast. For a historical and theoretical overview, Rothstein, Whaley 2013.

7   It is perhaps interesting to add that some of the soldiers recruited to design and build these fake weapons later went on to became famous artists, such as Ellsworth Kelly and Arthur Singer. See Beyer, Sayles 2015, 13.

Fig. 1   Dummy tanks built during the Operation Fortitude, 1944

meticulous that British intelligence was able to observe it and keep it under control at all its phases. When the job was done, a RAF aircraft – so the story goes – attacked the fake airfield and dropped a single (dummy) wooden bomb on it.[8] Here is another somewhat ironic case of unexpected extension of fictional frames. Even Bernini would have applauded.

However, even the more peaceful everyday life presents several cases of uncertain distinction between reality and fiction, showing how the relationship between frame and images is not always so close and univocally determined. And there is no need to resort here to thought experiments such as those of the indiscernibles famously discussed by Arthur Danto.[9] Let us take the far more trivial case of dentures. Surely, they are an example of *trompe l'œil*, although, like other similar prosthetic interventions, they do not aspire to aesthetic merit, that is, to be finally discovered so that the skill and dexterity of their workmanship can be appreciated. Well-made dentures must remain undetectable and if possible indiscernible from the real thing. Equally surely their function is best performed also thanks to an adequate framing context. But whether they are in the mouth of their rightful owner or in the showcase of a Museum of Medical History, dentures are in any case (fictional) three-dimensional and visual representations of real teeth. Their ontological status as images remains the same even if we radically modify their usual functional frame and even if we deprive them of any frame.[10]

---

8   There are doubts about the veracity of this story, which may be, ironically enough, a hoax (Shirer 1941, 575-6; Reit 1978, 60; O'Connor 2018, 219).

9   The *locus classicus* is the first chapter of Danto 1981.

10   Clearly – and I thank my anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point – if we put dentures in a museum showcase, we defunctionalize them, since dentures normally retain some of the original functions of the teeth they replace. But this holds true for all images, albeit to varying degrees. The picture of an animal can be used to correctly identify the species or usefully study its morphology, just as the maquette of an airplane can be used to test its aerodynamics. In general, each image instantiates

Fig. 2   Albrecht Dürer, *Crab*, 1495, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

But, if so, what about the opposite operation? What happens if I frame real teeth? The situation is a little more complicated, but it would be hasty and inappropriate to say that in this way, *eo ipso*, I obtain an image. The shark teeth I see in the display case of a Natural History Museum (if they are not a cast) are not a picture of the teeth, they are the real teeth of a real shark. The difference is clear. However, this does not mean that the frame has no possible effects. Within the museum setting, for example, the teeth of the fish can reveal, more clearly than in another context, a further representational value. That is, they can be *seen as* a specimen that exemplifies a whole anatomical or taxonomic typology or category. It should be added, however, that even images can have different potential representational values pointing in different directions. The crab painted by Dürer, for example **[fig. 2]**, in addition to representing a certain animal (both the single individual and the entire species), can equally

some of the properties (including functional properties) of the object it is an image of. From this point of view images or pictures function as homeomorphic iconic models, according to the classification proposed by Rom Harré. An iconic model represents (is the model of) something, its 'subject', by instantiating a certain number of morphological and functional properties of the modeled object, its 'source'. For an excellent discussion on the different relationships between subject and source, homeomorphic and paramorphic models, see Harré 2004, 5-20. On the reproductive (*Abbildungsmerkmal*) and pragmatic (*pragmatisches Merkmal*) features of models see also Stachowiak 1973, 131-4, and, on their iconic nature, Boehm 2007, 114-40.

be seen, on the one hand, as an exemplification of the distinctive features of the author's artistic style, or even of the German Renaissance painting, but on the other hand it could represent the iconotype of a certain species as well. In this case the cognitive frame depends on the attentional focus that selects and makes different properties of the same object relevant for different purposes.

If all images are representations, not all representations are images, at least if we want to hold the conceptual distinction and not simply make them synonyms. We will have to return to this point, but before proceeding further, it is perhaps useful to underline the importance of the difference between the ontological and phenomenological dimensions when we speak of images. Seeing a blurry image clearly is a far cry from seeing a sharp image blurry, even if in some cases the two lived experiences could be indistinguishable.

3 Thresholds and Frames

To say that frames of the works can be mobile and that it is sometimes the content that marks the boundaries of the container and not the other way around, means questioning the relationships, but also the differences, between the thresholds of the image and the thresholds of the frame. Reflection on this topic has often been conditioned, even if only involuntarily, by the fact that easel painting is usually assumed as the paradigm or focal model of the image kind in general, to the point that image, or painting, and frame could even seem consubstantial.[11]

In order to limit this typical framing effect, we can consider objects made with different techniques, for example sculptures, which could hardly be anything other than images. But identifying the material frame of a sculpture appears less obvious. What would be the frame of a self-standing sculpture, like a monument or similar? One could perhaps say that the urban or architectural context is the spatial frame of the statue, but this can be said in general for any material object that is still located in some particular place within a certain spatial context. However, painting too has often not only concealed but also openly challenged the constraint of the frame. In the Venetian church of San Sebastiano, Paolo Veronese painted the martyrdom of the titular saint by dividing the scene between the two opposite walls of the nave, the archers on one side and the martyr on the other, so that to hit their target the arrows would have to cross the real space (or virtual space, with respect to the reality of the world

---

11 For a recent discussion and a useful anthology on the theoretical and historical problems involved by the presence and functions of the frame, see Ferrari, Pinotti 2018.

of the image) of the entire width of the church. The phenomenological space of the spectator here becomes the place where the real and the virtual meet and overlap.

The problem of the boundaries of the image therefore also arises independently of the presence of the frame, and it is the images themselves that thematize it. Boundaries are notoriously a metaphysically thorny question, which always risks falling victim to the sorites paradox. As regards the genesis of images, the problem was already perfectly clear to Plato, in the famous question of Socrates (*Cratylus*, 432b-c), which highlighted its elusive processual dimension.

> Would there be two things, Cratylus and the image of Cratylus, if some god should not merely imitate your color and form, as painters do, but should also make all the inner parts like yours, should reproduce the same flexibility and warmth, should put into them motion, life, and intellect, such as exist in you, and in short, should place beside you a duplicate of all your qualities? Would there be in such an event Cratylus and an image of Cratylus, or two Cratyluses?

Hard as it is to draw a sharp line of demarcation, in the end another Cratylus, or his double, *is no longer* an image of Cratylus. It would therefore be counterintuitive to deny that images have thresholds or borders, especially physical borders. The case of easel paintings (like that of photographs, drawings, engravings, etc.) can certainly seem to be little problematic, because the boundary of the image usually coincides with the boundary of the material support on which the image supervenes, whether it is canvas, paper, wood, wall or other. But there are much more nuanced cases, even without resorting to Plato's paradox. Let us think of a fresco painting like, say, the one in the so-called *Room of the Giants* by Giulio Romano at the Palazzo Te in Mantua, or like the vault of the Sistine Chapel **[fig. 3]**. Apart from the frames, are they a single continuous image or should we count multiple images, if it even makes sense to try? And what about monumental sculptures such as the portrait of American presidents on Mount Rushmore, or the Crazy Horse Memorial on the Black Hills of South Dakota or the Ataturk monument in Smyrna? **[fig. 4]** If it is impossible to speak here of frames, it is also difficult to establish where exactly the image ends and the rock or mountain simply begins. Yet this difficulty does not prevent us from immediately and spontaneously seeing the carved faces *in* the stone, and what else could they be if not images?

Naturally, if an artist in a more economical mood, in order to save sweat, money, and explosives, had decided to make a hastier readymade of Mount Rushmore or Thunderhead Mountain, it would be even impossible to see or recognize it without the aid of some frame

or other indexical visual device. This reminds us of two things. First, that the so-called abstract or aniconic works are images only in a derivative sense, or *equivoce*; and secondly, that precisely these objects need frames, and not just material frames, if we want to recognize in them the performative capacity to somehow focus the problematic status of images, even if only to try to deny or question it. The painted wall of my room is also an abstract, aniconic, or non-representational work of painting, but it says absolutely nothing about representation or the relationship between reality and fiction. It is not sufficient that an object *is not* a representation or *is not* an image for it to intentionally deny images or representation.[12]

In reality, the concept of aniconic is logically dependent or parasitic on that of iconic (or of depiction), and it cannot be otherwise. Slightly oxymoronic expressions such as 'abstract image' always have an implicit thematic reference to 'traditional' mimetic pictures and pictorial images. Thus, in order to be able to say, as Pietro Conte recently wrote, that with modern abstract art "the medium ceases to function as a medium [...] thus emancipating itself from its century-old subservience to representation", we must understand and recognize the object in question at least as a former medium, so to speak, and thereby precisely that logical 'subservience' from which abstract art strives to free itself (Conte 2020, 18). An object which has not already begun to function as a medium, and which therefore obviously lacks specific representational properties, does not need to emancipate itself. A 'zero degree of representation' is, in itself, simply and generically a property of all non-representational objects, such as the wall in my room. All ordinary material objects are obviously opaque, so if abstract art wants to exhibit and thematize its own material opacity it must not get confused but, on the contrary, *distinguish* itself from real things, and therefore it needs evident rhetorical and deictic devices, to resume an argument proposed by Louis Marin (2001), i.e., those tangible frames which the image *qua* image can do without. An intentionally exhibited materiality is still a *representation* of pure materiality.

We may want to say that a completely red canvas by, for a classic example, Barnett Newman, or a *Dirt Painting* by Robert Rauschenberg, do not represent anything, and rather *present* themselves. But why could we not say the same for any object that presents itself by its mere presence, just as we admit that, by virtue of the so-called predicate entailment principle, necessarily if something *is-f* then it exemplifies *f-ity*? Thus, if we are to distinguish the allegedly more artistic and more telling "presentation" of Newman's paintings we must materially and logically tell them apart from other ordinary

---

12 On self-negating images, see Pinotti 2017; 2020.

Figure 3 Giulio Romano, Sala dei Giganti, 1531-36, Palazzo Te, Mantova

Figure 4 Crazy Horse Memorial, under construction since 1948, Black Hills, South Dakota

objects, first by the walls on which they hang. And if we do not like overly decorative traditional frames, the wooden stretcher is enough. In other words, we need to frame that kind of specific presentation as a "count-generated action," i.e., the action of using part of the painting to stand for or at least to "say" or "revealing" something, even "nothingness".[13] But this does not mark the crisis, let alone the end, of the representational paradigm, on the contrary, it is its hyperbolic revenge: the unrepresentable can only be grasped inasmuch as it is the object of representation (or of something that stands for representation).[14]

4 Framing Frame

It is clear, at this point, that we must speak of frames in the plural, because it is a polyvocal concept, which often lends itself to metaphorical use, and despite the conceptual affinities, the frame as a physical object is something very different from the frame as a cognitive perspective, a scheme of relevance or focusing pattern, as understood for example according to the point of view of the Frame Analysis developed by Erving Goffman (1974). Even images can have multiple frames at the same time. Indeed, we should say, for greater precision, that even works of art or images that are not physically framed produce virtual frames, which regulate our access to the fictional world, or to the make-believing game prompted by the work itself. It is that feature that Eugen Fink has called, in the wake of Husserl's phenomenology, *Fensterhaftigkeit*, a window-like feature (Fink 1930, 308). But such windows can open onto different fictional worlds, and even then it is not always immediately obvious where to locate the representational content properly framed by the image.

Consider for example the famous painted diptych by Van Eyck in the Thyssen Museum in Madrid **[fig. 5]**. The work brings into play an interaction between different frames of different order.[15] But what does it represent? Obviously, the scene of the *Annunciation*, however, not the world in which that event presumably took place, nor

---

13 On count-generated actions and representation, see Wolterstorff (1980, 262-3).

14 Such a framing operation is even more necessary when we speak, if only metaphorically, of (abstract) contents, messages, subjects, or meanings, which always imply relational properties. Otherwise, it is trivially obvious that we do not need art (nor modern abstract art) to discover that "something could not be said in painting," as Barnett Newman himself once stated (Newman 1992, 275). Perhaps we should bear in mind that a sentence like the famous one by Henri Focillon, according to which "form signifies only itself" (Focillon 1942, 3) is after all, *proprie loquendo*, a logical nonsense.

15 On the painting, see Preimesberger 1991. On the problem of the 'double vision' stimulated by the work, see also Belting 2013.

a symbolic place, as the Gothic church depicted in the other *Annunciation* by Van Eyck himself, now housed in the National Gallery of Washington. What we see in the window of the work is a virtual version of our actual world, in which we are faced, *hic et nunc*, by two sculpted statues in front of stone frames, yet representing, from within their virtual world, the world (virtual to the second degree) of the story of the Annunciation. The image is then built on a combination of different nested frames.

But the framing game can also be more puzzling. Let us take another example, the portrait of Aristotle in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna **[fig. 6]**. The sculpture is probably a copy of a Greek original by Lysippus, but in any case, it seems obvious to us to say that this is a portrait, a picture, of Aristotle. However, it would not be so implausible to suppose that the author of the work had in mind to represent not directly the head of Aristotle, but only the famous original model, the sculpture by Lysippus. In other words, we could imagine something like the use-mention distinction well known in analytic philosophy. Although the two hypotheses would be different from a philological and representational point of view, they would nevertheless coincide from a phenomenological perspective. For even if the artist intended only to faithfully copying a particular material object *qua* object (not *qua* image), in doing so he necessarily would
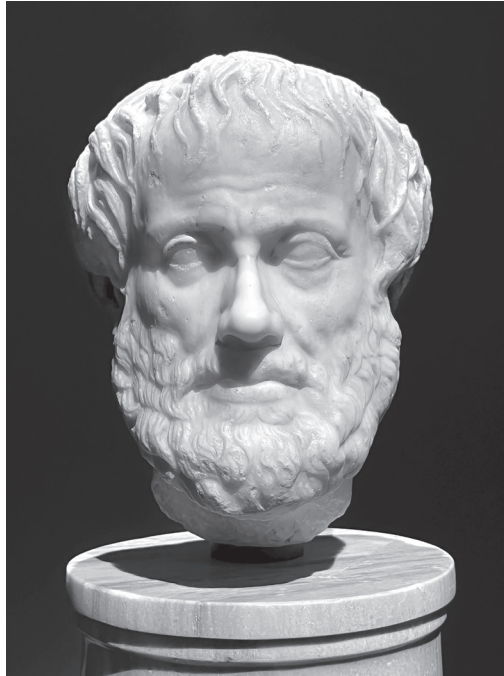
represent altogether the portrait, so making of the simple copy an image, the same image instantiated by the original sculpture. After all, the same image can have in principle a lot of different representational objects nested into one another, because the sameness is here warranted by a kind of transparency to content (and to nesting relations).

Such a situation is more common than our improbable experiment might suggest. A photographic scan of a book page is certainly an image, but it is also a copy or a recording – in the sense that John Haugeland gave the word (1991, 67-70) – of a text. In our most common usage, we usually prefer to bracket the image stratum to see and use the object as text. Even transparent frames do their job.

5 Really Virtual

It is often repeated that the advent of digital technologies, and the availability of increasingly immersive and increasingly frameless images, has led or will lead in the near future to a more or less complete confusion or indistinguishability between real and virtual, between reality and images. Daniel O'Shiel recently wrote, for example, that there is the "technological possibility or even probability, where holograms and a pervasive pure MR system could reach a level of

technological acuity that makes even foundational distinctions [...] – like perception and image, real and irreal, present and absent – all rather obsolete non-starters" (O'Shiel 2022, 210-11).

Here again, transparency plays a critical role, from an ontological point of view. Some time ago, Shimon Edelman, reviewing a book by Alva Noë, took up the well-known brain-in-the-vat experiment devised and elaborated by Daniel Dennett and Hilary Putnam. The entire passage is worth quoting here.

> [...] The dependence of the functioning of the mind on being in the world – Edelman wrote – can be qualified in an important sense: once my mind, perceptual systems and all, is fully formed – say, so as to become functionally equivalent to that of an average adult – the world can be safely detached (at least temporarily), without destroying the mind. If during such disconnection from the real world my optic nerve is artificially stimulated in a manner isomorphic to the spatiotemporal pattern of activity that would have been induced in it by a great white shark swimming in a deep blue sea, then by Zarquon I'll see a shark. Moreover, my perception of the shark will be none the less 'genuine' for being artificially induced than if I were to see the shark on my HDTV set, vegging out in front of which is a convenient homegrown substitute for a brain-in-a-vat experience. (Edelman 2006, 184)[16]

Today, as we know, there are much more immersive systems than an HDTV set to 'dive' into a deep blue sea and see a shark, but the specifically substitutional or vicarious function of these experiences still depends on some other reality out there from which the experiences themselves are (temporarily) 'safely detached'. Of course, if besides the brain (and perhaps the vat) there were nothing but electrochemical stimuli it would make no sense to say that reality is *just a virtual* image, because there would only and simply be that reality.[17]

After all, Plato was right. Even if we managed to have such a perfect technology as the one provocatively evoked by Socrates, to the point of being able to completely replicate every aspect of reality, we would not have transformed the world into images, we would have driven images out of the world.

---

16   The book reviewed is Noë 2004.

17   For a recent discussion on the philosophical options about the 'reality' of virtual reality see Chalmers 2022, in part. chapter 10, which compares what Chalmers calls 'virtual fictionalism' and 'virtual digitalism'.

Bibliography

Belting, H. (2013). *Spiegel der Welt: Die Erfindung des Gemäldes in den Niederlanden*. München: Beck.

Bernini, D. (2012). *The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini*. Edited by F. Mormando. University Park: Pennsylvania University Press.

Chalmers, D.J. (2022). *Reality +. Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Conte, P. (2020). *Unframing Aesthetics*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis International.

Derrida, J. (1987). *The Truth in Painting*. Transl. by G. Bennington and I. McLeod. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Edelman, S. (2006). "Book Review: Mostly Harmless". *Artificial Life*, 12, 183-6.

Edwards, H. J. (transl.) (1917). *Julius Caesar: De Bello Gallico*. London; New York: Heinemann-Putnam's Sons.

Fahrner, R., Kleb, W. (1973). "The Theatrical Activity of Gianlorenzo Bernini". *Educational Theatre Journal*, 25(1), 5-14.

Ferrari, D., Pinotti, A. (2018). *La cornice. Storie, teorie, testi*. Milano: Johan & Levi.

Fine, K. (2008). "Coincidence and Form". *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 82(1), 101-18.

Fink, E. (1930). "Vergegenwärtigung und Bild. Beiträge zur Phänomenologie der Unwirklichkeit" (1. Teil.). *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, 11, 239-309.

Focillon, H. (1942). *The Life of Forms*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Fraschetti, S. (1900). *Il Bernini, la sua vita, la sua opera, il suo tempo*. Milano: Hoepli.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Haugeland, J. (1991). "Representational Genera". Ramsey, W.; Stich, S.P.; Rumelhart, D.E. (eds), *Philosophy and Connectionist Theory*. Hillsdale; London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 61-89.

Heikkilä, M. (2021). *Deconstruction and the Work of Art: Visual Arts and Their Critique in Contemporary French Thought*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Levine, J. (2011). *Operation Fortitude: The Story of the Spies and the Spy Operation That Saved D-Day*. London: Collins.

Marin, L. (2001). "The Frame of Representation and Some of Its Figures". *On Representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 352-72.

Mast, G. (1984). "On Framing". *Critical Inquiry*, 11(1), 82-109.

Mütterlein, J. (2018). "The Three Pillars of Virtual Reality? Investigating the Roles of Immersion, Presence, and Interactivity". *Proceedings of the 51st Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (HICSS), Hilton Waikoloa Village, Hawaii, 1407-15.

Newman, B. (1992). *Selected Writings and Interiews*. Edited by John P. O'Neill. Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Noë, A. (2004). *Action in Perception*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

O'Connor, B. (2018). *Bletchley Park and the Pigeon Spies*. Raleigh: Lulu.com Editions.

O'Shiel, D. (2022). *The Phenomenology of Virtual Technology: Perception and Imagination in a Digital Age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Pinotti, A. (2017). "Self-Negating Images: Towards An-Iconology". *Proceedings,* 1, 856, 1-9.

Pinotti, A. (2020). "Towards An-iconology: The Image as Environment". *Screen*, 61(4), 594-603.

Preimesberger, R. (1991). "Zu Jan van Eycks Diptychon der Sammlung Thyssen Bornemisza". *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 54, 459-89.

Reit, S. (1978). *Masquerade: The Amazing Camouflage Deceptions of World War II*. New York: Hawthorne Books.

Rothstein, H., Whaley, B. (Eds.) (2013). *The Art and Science of Military Deception*. Boston-London: Artech House.

Shirer, W.L. (1941). *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent, 1934-1941*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Sutton, C.S. (2012). "Colocated Objects, Tally-Ho: A Solution to the Grounding Problem". *Mind*, 121, 483, 703-30.

Tamburini, E. (2012). *Gian Lorenzo Bernini e il teatro dell'Arte*. Firenze: Le Lettere.

Thomasson, A.L. (2007). *Ordinary Objects*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wittkower, R. (1958). *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600-1750*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Wolterstorff, N. (1980). *Works and Worlds of Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia